

First Casualty

They're mean, they're tough, they're highly trained
and the whole platoon hope the sergeant can find someone to surrender them too.

All humanity
on a hundred and fifty planets has gone to war.
Some see it as a chance to make a killing in the market.
Others know that the killing will be counted
in billions of human lives.

This is the story of four of them
on the tip of the spear.
Mary and Mattim on one side of the battle line.
Ray and Rita on the other.
All looking for a way out that will let them live.
If they can find it for themselves,
they just might find it for all humanity

Dedicated to
Lieutenant Robert A. Heinlein, USN, deceased
who showed us how it was done.

To
Lieutenant Commander Loren J. Moscoe, USN Ret. deceased
who taught me what it meant,
and made me mad enough to learn a hell of a lot.

To
Lieutenant Commander Michael J. Brennan, USN Ret.
And the crew at work who kept this book honest,
as much as they could.

And to
Ellen
who keeps all the different parts of me together.

ONE

Every alarm in Sergeant Mary Rodrigo's spacesuit went off at once. Red lights flashed on her eyeball as her heads-up display demanded her attention. She ignored them.

Mary had five moles laying a minefield for her. Mines were tricky beasts. Laying a field from underground was a tight bitch, not to be left to unsupervised remotes. Twitching her right hand, she froze them in place.

Mary twisted her right wrist and blinked twice, cycling her heads-up display to the screen her alarms were so hot on. The newly deployed infrared sensors were screaming about hot targets. *But there weren't supposed to be any — yet!*

She chinned her mike to a new channel. "Lek, we got a problem. Either our sensors are spooked, or the colonials got here without you knowing."

"Not bloody likely," the old guy chuckled. "Check the angles from the two outer sensors, girl. We've picked up the Colly attack fleet coming around Elmo Four!"

"Acid crap," Mary swore. "They're that sensitive!"

"Bet they made a fuel scoop and got their balloon heat shields out," Dumont said beside her, "What a ride for real, not just a vid-game," the young man from the streets said wistfully.

"I better pass this to the LT," Mary growled. "Let's get back to the mines." In the end, even Dumont and his street kids had voted her for sergeant, but that didn't mean he couldn't give her plenty of lip before he did what she said. Today, without a word, Dumont went back to putting in mines. On the other side of Mary, reliable Cassie had never quit work on the minefield.

Mary switched to the command channel. "Lieutenant, we got targets."

"Sergeant, where the hell have you been? What?" His voice died in mid-

question as Mary passed through the visual. "What . . . Where . . . How . . .?" he stammered.

"This is Major Henderson at battalion. What have you got for me?" So the battalion CO was lurking on their command channel, or had an alert on it. Considering all the lurking and alerts Lek had rigged through the brigade's net, Mary had no complaint.

She shut up; let the young officer talk to the man. Only when the wait stretched and started to bend did she speak. "Our infrared sensors have picked up the colonials coming around Elmo Four. We don't have an ETA on them," though she suspected Lek did by now. No need telling management what they didn't want to hear from dumb worker bees.

"Brigade finally risked a radar sweep about the time the bandits went behind the gas giant," battalion drawled. "I'll pass this report along. Colonials are right on schedule."

Which was not what the command net had been saying for the last fifteen hours. Lek had warned Mary not to believe the official word from HQ. She'd learned long ago not to trust what a foreman said. The old electronic wizard had been passing along to Mary and the rest of the unemployed miners the straight dope.

Battalion signed off; the young LT found his voice. "Sergeant, what the hell is going on here? We've got to talk."

What the sergeant had going on here was her own usual go at making everyone happy, to give the LT what he wanted, and the rest of the platoon what they wanted. What Mary wanted was to be light years away from all this with a beer in one hand and a warm hunk on her shoulder. But today, nobody was getting what they wanted. With a sigh, Mary got ready for a long talk.

* * *

Captain Anderson, commander, 97th Defense Brigade, frowned at his screen. "Since when does a leg infantry platoon have infrared sensors that good? Not that I'm complaining, but . . ."

His XO, Commander Inez Umboto, grinned at the display, showing no sign of surprise. "Half the troops of that platoon are out-of-work miners. Remember the complaints you fielded from several mine administrators about missing equipment, even a jet cart?"

"God, those things are expensive. Even the Navy can't afford'em. Though I'd love to have one."

Inez's grin dripped admiration for the culprits. "You may. Each company of the 1st of the 88th has one platoon heavy with miners. All three weighed in heavy at boarding but not enough to complain about." She paused for a moment. "You remember how tickled Comm was to get all those extra channels. It was an old miner, pulling boards from a 'Damaged Parts' box that got them for us."

Captain Anderson raised an eyebrow. "You didn't tell me."

"Sir, a good exec doesn't bother her boss with the details."

"What else haven't you bothered me with, Izzy?"

"I wish I knew. There's a shitpot of stuff out there, and I've only scratched the surface. Despite the rumors, I am only human and rarely can be in more than three places at once."

Anderson ignored the humor; today he needed an exec who could be a dozen places at once. Scowling down at his command display, he shook his head. He'd fought the coming battle hundreds of times in his forty year career — on the computer display.

Now he was fighting it for real, and it was going wrong in ways even the craziest umpire would not have thrown at him in a war game. Why had a picketboat been waiting for them the moment they jumped into this worthless system? Why was a major colonial force reacting in only 72 hours?

He'd expected problems on his side. Lasers were missing parts, power plants were missing cables, crates were miscoded, misplaced or just plain missing. Most of his grunts were ransacking containers, chasing the critical parts he needed to get the central defenses up. Without them, the colonials could land smack dab in the middle of his base crater. He'd expected time to work all this out. Only one platoon from each company had been shoved forward to block the three cracks in the crater wall.

Everything had gone too fast or too wrong. Maybe, just maybe, the sensors from that platoon would let him give the colonials a surprise or two.

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Mary took a deep breath and tried to give the lieutenant an answer he'd like. "I set up the sensors you ordered, sir." She keyed up the different coverages she'd

deployed: video, thermal, radar, electromagnetic. She ignored the Navy issue crap — they were too big and too noisy to be anything but targets.

"We don't have all that gear, Sergeant. How'd you do it?"

That was two questions. Mary chose to answer the easy one. With a flick of her wrist, she called up the schematic of the crater rim and the array she'd dug through it. "I used diggers from the mines to set this up. I got the place covered."

She activated the laser designators one by one, let them sweep the broken ground in front of the pass the platoon was ordered to hold at all cost.

"By God, you do have it covered." The LT whistled. "But how? The engineers are still at brigade. How'd you do this?"

Mary let her breath out slowly. How do you explain to a kid that never wanted to be anything but a toy soldier what it's like to spend twenty years of your life in the asteroid mines, to never want to be anything but a miner? And to get your pink slip and draft notice in the same envelope. "Our last shift at the mine, we figured if something might save our life, and it wasn't welded to the deck, we might as well borrow it. Boss men had just installed a lot of new equipment." Which was why they could afford to let half their workforce go — the senior half. They'd gotten all kind of media plaudits . . . and ignored the seniority clause of their labor contract.

Mary shrugged, or tried to. Armored space suits didn't allow much body language. "Who knows what was gonna be surplus, anyway?" Mary knew damn well the old equipment had already been sold off. She and the other members of her investment club had wanted to buy it. They were close, so close to setting up their own mine, having their own place, being their own people. But the gear went without an auction. And Mary and her friends got themselves a war.

So Mary had walked off her last shift with a jet cart.

"We're about done with the minefield," Mary finished.

"Hurry up and get back here," the LT answered.

Now Mary did fidget. "Sir, remember our deal."

"What part of it?" The LT's voice was cautious.

The first time Mary was elected sergeant had been a joke, a setup by a tough drill instructor to break his ex-civilians of their easygoing way. The miners voted for her;

Dumont's kids voted for him, but there were more miners. Mary was supposed to fall flat on her face. Instead, she'd found what it took to pull this angry bunch of people together. Sometimes begging, sometimes cajoling, sometimes threatening, they'd coalesced into a team for her. Maybe not the team the DI had in mind, but a team that pulled together when they had to.

The lieutenant had shadowed the platoon the last few days of boot camp, long enough to see how things were. Then, he'd taken Mary aside. "You know how to work this bunch," he'd said.

"Seems that way," she'd answered cautiously.

"I know how to fight. You know how to make them work. Together, we can get them out of this war alive. If anybody can. You game to work with me?"

He'd been the first to even mention survival; she'd taken his offered hand. For the last two months they'd been a team. Now, she'd find out just how far she could stretch it.

"Lieutenant, I can't leave this network I've built. In the mines, you get too far way from the work, something goes wrong and you can't fix it. From here I can fix anything."

"Sergeant, I've told you a dozen times, your job is to tell other people what to do. Assign somebody to stay out there."

"Can't, sir. If it's too dangerous for me, it's too dangerous for anyone." She had a long wait for his answer.

"You dug in good?" he asked.

Mary glanced around the cavern she and Cassie had turned into an observation post — maybe a tomb. Once the servos swung the half meter thick stone back, it would be well closed. A billion years ago when the crater was made, a pinnacle had slid from the still molten rock. It sheltered her outpost from observation from across the plain where the attack would come. "Dug in as good as time allows, sir."

There was a long pause. "Okay, Mary, you win this one. Why didn't you tell me what you had in mind?"

"Sir, you said you didn't want anyone on this side of the rim, just a few sensors. In the mines, when management makes up its mind, they don't want more talk."

"What I meant, Sergeant, was I wanted all of the platoon behind the rim, where

their artillery couldn't wipe us out. Maybe I didn't say it as well as I should have. When this is over, we've got to talk about how to talk."

"Yes, sir." Mary said. Talking was what she had in mind. She checked the one digger. Her best, it was halfway across the plain, towing one of Lek's fiber optic patch lines behind it. If it did its job, even secure communications wouldn't keep Mary and the rest of the miners from having a talk with the colonials before anybody got killed.

* * *

"Captain Anderson, Sensors here. My witches have something we think you'll like."

"Did she say bitches?" Umboto grinned.

"Down, Commander, we've got a fight coming, and that college professor is on our side."

"Oh, right, I keep forgetting," the commander mumbled.

The captain tapped the comm portion of his board. "Commander Miller, what have you got for me?"

Immediately his board changed to display the gas giant and their moon. Three red lines inched from the giant towards them. "The colonial ships are right on schedule. I expect the vanguard in sixteen minutes. The main body is ninety seconds behind them, led by a pair of superheavy cruisers. 'Jane's Fighting Ships' says they have an even dozen 9.2" laser cannons." Only three months from college lecture halls, Miller did slip easily into lecture mode. Commander Umboto hated it. Captain Anderson put up with it. "There are two more heavy cruisers with 8-inchers. Rest are light cruisers with 6-inchers. They're in three lines abreast."

"Probably plan to flatten us in one pass," the XO observed.

"I agree with Commander Umboto," Miller said.

That had to be the first time the two women had agreed on anything. Anderson wished they'd picked a better subject. "I concur," he said. And if they flattened the 97th, the only defenses left to Pitt's Hope would be those in the Pitt system. A major industrial and population center like Pitt's Hope had to be defended here, at least one system out, where the collateral damage from rockets and lasers wouldn't kill a million people. The problem was how to defend this worthless bit of rock. "XO, how's my Crossbow Project coming?"

The commander's smile was all teeth as she snapped to and gave him a drill field salute. "Ancient as you are, sir, but ready at your command."

"I just hope they're as good. Sensors, I need fast and accurate altitude information."

"Not going to be as easy as I'd hoped," Miller answered. "They just dumped their scoop balloon shields and fell off the infrared scanners."

Inez and the captain exchanged nods; that was a critical requirement. No commander willingly took a big, hot flag into a fight, but if he didn't have spare shields, an admiral might have to. This one had dumped his, and was shooting right into Anderson's trap. *Assuming I haven't set a fox trap for a bear.*

Unaware of the silent communication between the captain and his XO, Miller continued. "That infantry platoon has some damn fine sensors. We've hyped up the gain on the video and are tracking the Unity fleet, but, Captain, these bastards are coming on fast. They're not going to make any sudden changes."

Anderson nodded. "At my age, predictable is nice. Even dull would be fine. But let's not assume anything, keep the reports coming." He turned to Inez. "I need you at Crossbow."

"That's where I'm headed."

What Anderson really needed was a battle squadron riding top cover for him. "Where is my damn Navy?" he muttered.

* * *

Captain Mattim Abeeb needed for nothing. He had a beer, a quiet corner in a relaxed bar . . . and three active readers. Everything he needed for another long evening studying what the navy thought a drafted skipper needed to know.

Then Buck Ramsey stormed through the barroom door. "Damn the Navy. Damn them all to hell. First they commandeer my ship. Then they blow it to hell."

A dozen other merchant officers, also cramming for the navy commissions they'd been impressed into, glanced up, but Buck locked eyes with Mattim. "I've pushed that ship through space for ten years without a scratch. They have her three months and she's gone." He stumbled toward Mattim.

Mattim put down his beer, pushed his readers aside, and made ready to give

Buck his full attention. If the navy so much as dented his *Maggie D* during the overhaul they were giving her, Mattim would not stop at a bar. He'd head for navy headquarters with a bomb in his hip pocket.

"What happened?" he asked as Buck plopped into his booth.

"That damn power plant, Matt. They're strapping half of a gigawatt dirtside power plant onto our ships."

"Certainly your engineer . . ."

"Daisy quit over navy guff. They gave me one of theirs to replace her. 'Top of the line,' they told me. 'Knows everything there is about power plants.' Well he's learning how to dodge pitchforks now, 'cause he blew the whole stern of my ship to hell. Every one of my engineers . . . except Daisy."

Buck was running out of steam; in a moment the full meaning of his words would slam into him. A waitress showed up dressed in a smile and not much else. Her lack of attire was lost on Mattim and Buck. Anger was crumbling into grief as it hit the captain just how many of his old crew were dead. Mattim spoke without taking his eyes off his friend. "Whiskey. Irish whiskey. Your best."

"The bottle," Buck added. "Dear God, Matt, all of them."

Mattim watched helpless as tears rolled down his fellow captain's cheeks. On the vid above the bar, it was halftime at the zero g lacrosse game. A grinning announcer told them the evening news had first vids of the marine landing in the next star system out. "An impregnable defense that will keep any rim crazies from getting close to Pitt's Hope."

"Bloody damn hope so, 'cause there's no fucking navy," a civvy at the bar mumbled . . . loud enough the officers in training had no trouble hearing.

Mattim got an arm around Buck's shoulders just fast enough to keep his friend in his seat. Still, Matt had to agree with the dirtbag. Until the Navy quit wasting time teaching merchant captains what they'd learned twenty years ago. Until the Navy turned loose the engineers like his own Ivan who knew the power plant of his ship better than his wife's body, the Navy was going to get junk, not the made-over warships they wanted.

And the marines would be on their own.

The drinks arrived. He and Buck began the long, slow process of getting the

pain out.

* * *

Sergeant Mary Rodrigo edged her mole a fraction higher, checking the echo carefully. There was still two centimeters of dirt between it and the surface of the pass. She backed it out and had it shove the mine back where it had been. To any surface scan, the gap was as virgin as it had been a billion years ago when the cooling rock of the rim cracked and split open.

Good.

"Old lady, what we gonna do?" Dumont was the coolest of the kids, which was why they followed him. Now he was one of Mary's corporals and had listened in on the channel Lek used to pass along what was really happening. He knew the colonials were due any time now, and the rest of the company was a long way out. "I mean, some of those Colly troops were killing people before us street kids were hatched. They gonna stomp right over us and not even slow down. We got to get gone from here."

If they ran, they'd die. "Du," Mary cajoled, "we've dug you good solid holes with the mining gear. Hunker down. If we hang together, we can make it through together." How many times had Mary said that? In the mines it worked. Would it work on a battlefield?

"You old folks always got something up your sleeves. What you dreamed up this time?"

Mary never lied to Cassie, Lek, or other miners who'd saved her ass too often to count. The same didn't apply to Dumont and his kids. Still, she'd rather distract him than lie to him. "You seen the minefield. You know the sensors I've put up. Your girls got us the extra rockets."

"Yeah, some of the girls traded real nice for that shit. But none of us gonna die for that joking green flag." Dumont shook his head; most of the movement was lost in the suit.

Mary hadn't asked how Dumont's girls got the extra gear, especially the big rockets. She was willing to do anything to see her team come out of this alive; they were too. Maybe Dumont deserved the whole truth; Mary checked to make sure she was on one of Lek's very private channels. "Maybe we can talk to the colonials before the shooting starts. Maybe we don't have to kill each other."

"You think so?" Dumont didn't sound nearly as happy about the prospect as Mary had expected. "Them Colly goons don't stop to ask no questions. They just roll up to you and over."

"I heard that too. We'll try to catch them early. And we got enough here to slow them down. Maybe to talk to them. If not, to stop them. Trust me, Du, we're gonna get through this."

"I'm thinking maybe we just might," the kid said softly.

"I'm thinking the last mine's in and we ought to get back." Cassie broke from her concentration, her right hand the only part of her moving as she supervised her moles. She stretched tall, then wide. "Sure you don't want company?" Cassie offered. "It's gonna get lonesome out here."

Mary owed her life to Cassie too many times to count, and she'd returned the favor often enough. It would be good to have someone here, someone to talk to when the time got slow, someone to share the burden with when it got through to Mary what she was doing, really doing. "Thanks, Cassie. You're good, but I got to do this one myself. No sharing."

"God go with you," Cassie whispered as she gave Mary a hug, battle armor to battle armor and ducked out the hole and onto the jet cart.

Dumont clapped Mary on the shoulder. "Suit looks good. Take care, Sergeant," and he was gone.

As Mary ordered the jacks to swivel the massive stone door closed and settle it solidly in place, it dawned on her. That was the first time Dumont had ever called her "Sergeant" when the lieutenant wasn't listening. "He picked a hell of a time to get respectful," she muttered through a grin.

Mary cycled her heads-up display through the sensor coverage of the gap and both sides of the crater rim. Her diggers were charged; if she had to juggle something, she was ready. Thanks to the jet cart, there were no footprints on this side of the rim. She switched to a view of the platoon. Using the excavator from the mine, everyone was dug in solid. The LT had planned to use the rill for cover. Half the platoon was still dug in there, but two squads now were scattered behind it. Good.

But sensors showed an awful lot of tracks pointing to where the fire teams had gone to ground. Mary wasn't the only one checking. "Sergeant, you on line yet?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"We need to dust this place. Make footprints disappear."

"Yes, sir. Nan, use the cart and all the nitrogen we got left. Blow away the footprints and cool down any hot spots. I'll pass you the sensor picture."

"Will do, boss."

On Mary's screen, Nan was out, gliding over the ground in the cart, blowing compressed nitrogen. The lieutenant was also up, walking toward the crest of the gap.

"Lieutenant?"

"Sergeant, I'd like to see the other side, too. You can't have all the fun." This was the kid's first battle; she'd heard the longing in his voice as he talked about it. She'd needed the same chance to taste the ground, get the feel of how the battle would unfold. The kid was green as slime, but not dumb.

"Aye, aye, Lieutenant. I've turned the mines off."

"Lek showed me your plan. You've set up a good attrition field, Sergeant. Thin them down before we hit them. You dug in deep?" The video showed him standing at the crest, slowly turning his suit to take in the scene before him.

"Pretty deep, sir, in a cavern with a half meter thick stone covering the entrance."

"Skunks, five minutes out," the command circuit interrupted. "Everyone to cover."

"Well, everything's done," the lieutenant turned and started a low gravity hop down the gap. "Now we do our duty. See you when we're done, sergeant."

"Yes, sir," Mary said. One way or the other, she would.

* * *

Major Ray Longknife sat, his back ramrod straight. From the spare seat on the bridge of the Unity attack transport *Friendship* he had a good view – of the red Unity banner with its yellow lightning bolt painted on the ship's nose, and the blinking displays that made his hands clench into fists. *The Navy was screwing the ground pounders — again!*

The admiral had promised a cakewalk when he'd ordered the 2nd Guard Assault Brigade aboard ship on an hour's notice. "We'll blow those Earthie scum away with relativity bombs, and seize Pitt's Hope before they know what hit them."

Well, the relativity bombs hadn't hit a damn thing. He'd known they were in trouble when Rita. correction, Senior Pilot Nuu – lowered her beautiful eyes at the Admiral's bloody optimism. She'd explained during the three day-run out here that the jump point they'd be using was horribly unstable. She'd been right.

Every ship exited the jump point on a different heading. Each captain followed his orders and launched bombs as soon as he was through and before slowing. None hit even close to where ever so slight hints suggested his enemy was. *Damn!*

The jump had one benefit. Scattered and low on fuel, the fleet had made a scoop pass on the gas giant. That at least slowed the damn Navy down. The cruiser's lasers might actually hit something on their firing pass.

"Quixote." Ray snarled the code word. On that order, the admiral would drop the 2nd right in the crater the Earthies were using for their defense. Did he really expect grunts to tilt with windmills and win? There was a second code word, Rosebud, to land the transports outside the crater. One site would even save them a low pass across the Earth defenses. Ray and Senior Pilot Nuu both voted for Rosebud One. Quixote and Rosebud. Computer generated code names; Ray doubted the admiral even knew who Don Quixote was. He also doubted the admiral had any idea what he was sending the 2nd Guard up against.

Then again, neither did Ray. That was the problem. Wait until you know more, and you'd face more. Boot the Earth hirelings before they dug in, and he might get the easy win the admiral wanted. The 2nd was a proud outfit; it had never lost a battle. Ray would not be its first CO to break that record.

* * *

Carefully, Mary settled into an almost comfortable slouch. Whoever designed battle suits had made them great for running, leaping, killing. They hadn't put much thought into "hurry up and wait." The status lights of the gear around her gave the only light in the cavern. Mary waited; it couldn't be long now.

As she now stretched into a private eternity, Mary found herself with time on her hands and the first time to think in way too long. *What are you doing here, girl?*

Mary scowled at herself. *I'm no girl, and the question has too many answers.*

She was here because she had no choice. A couple of kids from Dumont's gang ran after they got their boot camp "haircut." Their bodies were found next day, throats slit, decorated with little green flags and a note from the "Patriots for Humanity."

Nobody'd been arrested for the murders.

That night, the platoon talked it out after lights out. Dumont and the other kids wanted to go over the wall, head for the hills until the war was over. When Cassie asked them if any of'em had ever hunted or eaten roots, they got quiet and sullen.

Some of the miners wanted to strike. Lek asked them to read their labor contract, then unfolded his enlistment papers. "Nothin' in here about a labor rep, but it do say we got to obey the orders of our superior officers. I checked. They can shoot us if we don't."

"They can't shoot all of us," someone in back whined.

"Two kids ran, two kids dead. How many of you got wives that will raise a stink?" Lek asked. "Got family that have any say at the Commissioner's Office?"

About that time it dawned on Mary. Slowly she'd stood. "We got nobody," she said, looking around the room. "Nobody out there." She jerked a thumb at the rest of the world. "But we do got somebody. We got each other." She opened her arms like some kind of corner preacher — only she felt it. "We got to look out for each other, 'cause sure as pay's gonna be shorted, nobody else gonna look out for us. We can't get out of this. But we can get through it. We can if we do it together."

Which had probably been her first step on the way to being the platoon's sergeant. Cassie told her, after the vote, "We need a ma. You're the closest some of us will ever come to one." That had to be a laugh, Mary had never known her own ma or pa.

So, to keep her friends alive, Mary was here, getting ready to kill a lot of people in a war that didn't mean a damn. And when it was over, the only jobs open would probably be farther out in what was now enemy space. Why not do the job hunting as prisoners of war? Mary checked; the digger burrowing under the plain was about four clicks out, halfway to the escarpment. "Hurry up, little mole. If they ain't using radios, your little wire patch may be the only way we can get a word in edgewise."

TWO

Senior Pilot Rita Nuu liked having Major Ray Longknife on her bridge. It hadn't always been so. He'd done a good imitation of a horse's rear end the first time he crossed her bridge combing. As the senior woman in Wardhaven's attack transport squadron, she was used to male disapproval. It had taken her a while to realize that his attitude had nothing to do with her and everything to do with his beloved brigade. Once that was straightened out, she discovered she actually liked the guy. Love came later.

They had discovered, both on and off ship, that working together was far more fun than fussing. At the moment, Rita was putting the Major's position to good use for her squadron. As usual, the admiral didn't think the transports needed to know boo. However, Longknife's access to the command net was displayed on her heads-up. It helped to know what the hell was happening.

To Rita's right, Junior Pilot Cadow had the conn; his hands showed white knuckles on the stick. Technician Hesper did double duty behind Rita, running the electronic counter measures stations and communications. Ray rode the jump seat behind Cadow, his portable battle station linked with the *Friendship's*, "The destroyers in the van are going in," The Major reported. "The *Dry Lighting* is low. The *Stormy Night* is high. Should have visuals and sensors sixty seconds before the cruisers start dusting down the crater." Again Rita wished they had a cruiser attached to the transports. Setting down in that crater five minutes after the cruisers shot it up and two hours before they'd be back was not her idea of smart.

Rita eyed two data screens. One showed strung out lights representing the gun line. The other waited for sensor data on their target.

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The rocket was old, and the dumbest of the dumb. In its nose was a tiny proximity fuse to tell it to blow up a few meters above the ground, scattering its plastic flechettes in a deadly cloud to puncture battle suits or thin-skinned vehicles. Today, the proximity fuse was disabled.

Today, it simply waited for the back-up timer to tick away the seconds as its motors blasted at full power. The tiny brain did face a challenge, though. The weight distribution of the rocket was off. The simple minded CPU had to adjust the rocket nozzles again and again until the missile took on a slight spin. The dumb control unit had not intended the spin, but it did make its job simpler.

The source of the rocket's problem, if it had been wise enough to seek out and solve problems, was a collar that had been added around it's payload section. A thick cylinder of sand, barely held together by glue, covered the entire warhead.

Two of the rockets shed their dusty mantles. Three more could not solve the problems created by them and wandered off on their own track. None of them heard Commander Umboto's proud shout. "Crossbows away, Captain. Thirty-one running hot, straight and normal.

* * *

"What's that?" Rita and Ray asked at the same moment.

Hesper worked her board with quick deft fingers. "Stealthy something, Not well guided. They'll miss the destroyers by a wide margin. Doubt if the cans'll waste a shot on them."

"Hope all their defenses are as shabby," Rita prayed.

The first sensor reports came in — video of the crater. A couple of piles of ice stood out, but they looked like ship armor that had been dumped there for later processing. "Give me some other scans," the Major breathed. "Infrared, electro-magnetic. We can't go in there on visual alone."

A new scan started working it's way down the screen. "Electro-magnetic. Good." the Major smiled.

The picture went fuzzy, then turned to static.

"Hesper, get that back," Rita ordered.

"No signal," ECM answered.

"Fix it."

"Can't, skipper. It's not us. We got a beam from the flag, but it's just noise.

"Is the *Dry Lightning* gone?" Codow choked on the question.

Rita glanced at her display. "Everybody's still squawking."

"Hesper, can you get me the Flag's command net?" Longknife asked softly.

"Lurk on it regularly, sir,"

"Please put it on speaker," the Major requested. He *never* gave an order on Rita's bridge. If he wanted something, he went through her. Rita didn't begrudge him today's directness.

"Comm," the admiral shouted from the speaker, "get me through to those tin cans."

"No can do, sir, we got a brick wall ahead of us. No comm to or from them.

"Sensors, what kind of brick wall?"

"Damned-if-I-know. Those missiles that missed started exploding and suddenly we got dust and something else all over the place."

"Gun squadron, begin acceleration at three g's. Now." My, but the admiral was sounding a tad hysterical. "Transports." Ah, the admiral finally remembered them. "Execute . . ."

"What?" Codow yelped.

"Signal lost," Hesper reported.

"Can we accelerate? Ray asked.

"We're in landing mode," Rita answered. "Even if we go to three g's, we'll float over their base like target balloons."

The Major pursed his lips. "Rosebud One."

"Once grounded," Rita nodded, "we can always launch out into the opposite orbit.

Ray considered it for a moment, then shook his head. "Political officer would have my head on a platter."

Rita snorted.

"And these folks *have* just landed. It must be a mess down there. I've got seven hundred combat veterans. What have they got? A mob that's never had a shot fired at them."

"That's what the jollies tell us," Rita spat the epitaph for political officers.

"We got to find out sooner or later who's right. If he is, I damn sure want to find out sooner. Set us down at Rosebud 1."

"I've got the conn," Rita snapped, taking the sticks back from Codow. "Just once, Ray, I wish you'd let somebody else find out if the buzz saw is unplugged. Just once."

"Where can you set us down?"

"How close you want to be, grunt?"

"About thirty klicks from the pass," Ray ordered. "It'll make for a short approach march, put the transports safely out of range and you can keep the rockets warm if we come running back and need a quick ride out of here."

"Just make sure you come back."

* * *

Mary jumped when the infrared signals started screaming again. Six ships, rockets pointed her way, sunk over the horizon. "Landing Force arriving," she announced, ready to get to work. To do, as she had every day of her working life, the job she was paid for.

She checked the digger; still not to the escarpment. They had to get a chance to talk to the colonials! But what do you say? They sure as hell hadn't included that in boot camp. She glanced at her board; she was ready to fight. That they'd taught her well. How do you not fight in a war where everybody else is?

* * *

Grandpa always told Ray a soldier expects problems, and problems were staring Ray in the face the second he disembarked. His largest transport, the *Loyal*, stood at an angle, one landing gear in a crater. The right edge of the roll-off ramp was down — the rest hung in space. Engineering platoon was rigging a derrick to offload the artillery the hard way.

The light assault teams of Company B and C bounced buggies off their transports and went about preparing for as fast start as Ray would have done when he commanded a company. Good people.

"Santiago," Ray called up his exec, "Use A company for site security and to help the engineers. I'll move out with the vanguard. Get the heavies in D and E company moving as quickly as possible. I'll need artillery as soon as possible."

"Right, sir." was all the answer Ray needed.

Ten minutes later, the light companies were mounted up and impatient to lead the charge. "Santiago, how soon can you give me artillery?"

"How about two rocket launchers right now."

"You're a miracle man. Good luck."

"Good luck yourself, and God speed. Give'em hell. See you for supper tonight in one of the Earthies luxury chow halls."

"With real steaks and fresh potatoes."

Longknife swung aboard C company's command rig as it passed and plugged himself into the brigade network. Security was guaranteed by the communication filament trailing out from the carrier to the command post back here. His orders would not be intercepted or garbled. 2nd Guard was experienced and ready. He couldn't help but pity the poor bastards up ahead.

* * *

Mary followed the descending ships, handing them off to battalion, who in turn bucked them to Brigade. As Mary lurked in the background, they ended up talking to a very angry navy type, a Commander Umboto, who was pissed as hell that nobody had any long range rockets ready to go.

"Miller, you store those coordinates and I'll go kick butt. If we can't get some rockets off the ground, my boot will damn sure get some lieutenants flying in that direction."

The comm link went dead with a loud click, as if the commander had bitten off her mike. Damn, there were some real hard cases here. Mary wondered if they were tough enough to win. She checked her digger . . . almost to the escarpment. What would happen to Umboto if their platoon cut its own peace? She'd probably live

through it. They all would. *Come on, digger.*

Mary called up her squad leaders: Lek, Cassie, Thu, Dumont and Berra. "What's it look like?"

Cassie and Dumont were Mary's back up, neither willing to say who was primary. After a long pause, Dumont spoke first. The kid was subdued. "We're dug in. I guess we're ready."

There was a beep, Mary focused on her heads-up. "Lieutenant, we got rolligons headed our way."

"Thanks, sergeant, I make out a dozen."

Lek coughed gently to make himself known on net. If the LT was surprised to find a lurker, he said nothing. "Computer makes out ten wheeled vehicles spread out in the lead. Two columns with another ten coming up behind them. A tracked vehicle is pulling up the rear of both columns. Looks like another pair of columns about five clicks behind the first."

"Corporal, put that through to mine and the sergeant's heads-up immediately."

"Yessir," Lek answered.

"Sergeant, looks like we got two companies coming our way. The tracks are probably artillery of some sort. Damn, I wish we had rockets with longer reach than ten clicks."

The regular issue was short ranged. The LT knew nothing of what Dumont's girls had gotten them. Just now, Mary wasn't ready to let him know what she had up her sleeves. He'd just want to start whopping the enemy soonest. Mary wanted to keep her hold cards back for a bit. Maybe, if nobody was hurt, nobody would have to be hurt. She checked the mole she'd sent across, it was at the escarpment, but making slow headway.

Mary adjusted a few of her sensors. When next she looked up, the enemy was at the escarpment, eight clicks away; rolligons scattered loosely. One man had dismounted and stared her way, taking in the gap and the rim around it. A gleam came off the fiber optic cable streaming from his suit.

"What'cha'gonna do, man?" she whispered, hoping he wouldn't do anything until her mole could find his comm wire.

* * *

Major Longknife studied the ground before him. Unlike the flat plain they'd just crossed, this was rolling and broken by boulders from the time of the creation of the huge crater, and small craters since. He'd walked similar terrain with grandfather, examining his defense of Goundo Pass Three on Yama-8. Grandpa had earned his colonelcy there. He'd also stopped just the kind of attack Ray was about to make.

Eyeing the ground with thirty years of training and experience, he liked what he saw. The plain, rim and the pass looked untouched since creation. He maxed the zoom on his suit binoculars. At the crown of the pass were footsteps. One set.

"So you had to see for yourself." The man facing him was curious, or just needed to get personal with his battlefield, get past the vid and heads-up.

Good man. Longknife would use that against him.

The Major called up his deployment on his heads-up. Two companies here. One coming up, heavier with artillery. Santiago was holding the last company back. He'd send them forward with the last of the heavy stuff. For a moment, Longknife cursed not having his command van with its full sensor suite. The XO had taken him at his order, artillery first. Still, it would have been better to have slipped the van in somewhere in the middle. Weight of salvo was good, but Intelligence would be nice directing that salvo.

"Should have thought of that when I was giving the order." Usually Santiago used his head better in reinterpreting his orders. Not today. Well, C Company had recon assets.

"Tran, talk to me about that rim."

"Sensors show standard issue snoops and not much else. Well, we got something that might be a whiff of nitrogen but it only showed for a second and we can't get it back. No hot spots. No dust. It's clean. We are picking up something underfoot. We've turned lose a counter-miner to hunt it down."

"You got anything to send over there?" Longknife asked.

"One Dervish Mod 3 is up, other two are busted. We couldn't fix them on the way out here . . ."

"Not much a tech can do in three G's," the Major absolved the support staff. "If you will, Captain, launch what you can."

"Yes, sir. Tech Sergeant Callahan, boot that mother."

The Dervish was away in a blink.

* * *

"What the hell," Mary yelled. Coming at her in a crazy dance, now up, now down, now right, now left — way too fast to track — was something.

"It's a scout," the LT observed, "a Dervish I think. Laser, up and ready," he ordered. "Sergeant, feed us a track."

One of Dumont's kids had tested fastest on the one laser rifle the platoon rated. Despite Lek's best scrounging efforts, one was all they had. Nobody would trade nothing for what few anti-missile weapons they had. Dumont had his fire team sleeping with theirs. Only 12 millimeters, it was small compared to the big navy guns. Still, it was *their* laser.

Mary passed numbers and hoped the team was as good at the real thing as they'd been with the vid game they trained on. The scout reached the base of the rim, dodged right, rose, then jinked left. At the top of the rim, it went right, then left and slipped over the crest. If Mary hadn't had her sensors covering every square inch of the place, she'd have lost it.

"Dumont, it's yours," she said.

Even as she did the hand over, the laser rifle spat a bolt.

First shot missed clean as the scout went right. Next shot was closer, but the damn thing jumped five meters. It jinked to the left — directly into a bolt.

Whether the kids had guessed right, or just missed in the right direction, they'd done it. Chunks of wreckage shot out in a dozen directions and began to fall slowly.

"We did it, we did it," the youngsters screamed as one.

But had we done it soon enough? Mary turned her attention back to the wheels on the plain. Some were already negotiating their way through low places in the escarpment.

"Here they come," she announced on wide net, then gave full attention to her far digger. It had to find that cable.

* * *

Longknife zoomed the picture on his heads-up display and scowled. None were completed before the Dervish was popped. Infrared showed hot spots everywhere but a dust down around the rill. Had the idiot deployed his people in there? That was either stupid or a desperate move by an unprepared force. The electro-magnetic scan that would show him the location of every racing heart beat was . . . *jammed!*

In theory that was possible, but he'd never had it done to him before. The Major blinked hard. What was he up against here? Someone had downed his Dervish fast. Good shooter or dumb luck? He wasn't supposed to be facing good troops, just hasty conscripts who'd break at the first tap. "Was the dust down for real," Longknife mused, "or just to confuse me?"

"Major, we're ready to move out."

Longknife smiled. It was time to commit, and there was nowhere near enough to go on. For twenty years he'd faced this, just like Dad and Grandpa before him. *Let's kick over this ant hill and see what happens.* Which was all there was to do.

"Companies advance, A on the right, B on the left. Keep your intervals loose. Your objective is the rim wall. Keep your heads-up, use what cover you can. Until things develop, hang loose and keep ready for anything. Good luck and Godspeed. Now let's show'em 2nd Guard's the best there is."

The fire teams answered with a shout as the carriers moved out. Ten rifles to a carrier and two carriers to a platoon. The Earthies still used the fifty man platoon. In a few minutes, they'd learn what the twenty troopers in a Unity platoon could do. One hundred to a company, two hundred rode by his command. D company was four clicks out with three more launchers and a pair of tube artillery. If he used his two launchers now, they'd be reloaded before the troops reached the crater.

"Rockets, pop their sensors on the rim. Use the rest of your load to lay down a salvo on the other side. Standard long box pattern. Use the rill as your center line."

"Roger. Salvo on the way." The tracks had leveled themselves on jacks as soon as they halted. Rockets began budding from their launchers as the words echoed in his ears.

Three meters from Ray, the ground erupted. He smiled, the counter-miner had bagged it's bug, too. The Earthies were losing all their sensors. Hot damn!

* * *

"Damn," Mary groaned as the digger across the plain went dead. Mining diggers weren't rigged with sensors, still Mary had picked up readings through the rock. With something digging ahead of her, she'd pushed her digger to the max, hoping to get a fast patch into their comm net. The digger was gone, and with it their one chance to settle this nice and easy.

Her heads-up went wild.

"Rockets, incoming." Mary shouted. Pair after pair of missiles appeared on her heads-up.

"Expect sixteen if they're the large ones, sixty-four if they're pelting us with the little stuff." The lieutenant again provided the military analysis. "Those dinky things can't touch us in our holes, so stay low men and hug your boots."

* * *

Dumont didn't need the LT to tell him to stay low. He and Tina crouched as deep in their hole as they could, holding each other tighter than when they made love.

"We got'em," Blacky's voice rang in Dumont's ears.

"Got what?" he asked, like they were back on the Pitt, cruising for rags.

"The rockets. Watch me pop'em."

Dumont blinked his heads-up to life, it overwrote his eyeball, mottling Tina's pale complexion with the tracks of fast moving missiles. Mary had promised what she could see, she showed them all. *And what Blacky saw, he shot at.*

"Damn it, Blacky, those things'll home on you." Around Tina's nose a second and third dot winked out.

"Not while I got'em in my sights," Blacky crowed.

A fourth disappeared.

"Private, get that rifle in your hole." the lieutenant shouted, voice cracking. "Your ammo won't hold out. You're only making yourself a target." Two more dots just below Tina's eyes vanished. But her forehead looked like a bad attack of acne. And they were changing direction, arrowing straight for Blacky.

"Can't you do something?" Tina whispered.

"Run over to Blacky's hole just in time to get blown to jelly with him." Dumont wasn't about to do that, even if a corporal was supposed to. And nobody had told him a corporal was.

Two more dots disappeared.

"Damn, it's not shooting anymore," Blacky screamed. "Amy, switch me to another juice bag."

"Not enough time," Mary yelled. "Pull it in and get down!"

"I'm going. I'm going," Blacky hollered.

Dumont wanted to look, see if Blacky had finally done what someone told him to. He kept his head down. *Don't make yourself a target.* He could check on Blacky when the barrage was over. Check on what was left of him. On Dumont's display, the dots were flocking to Tina's lips. He wanted to kiss her. Damn suit. Some of the dots further back, around her eyes were still spread out. Dumont held his breath and Tina tight. The explosions began. He pissed his suit and his bowels let go. Tina screamed as he was thrown against her. He gripped the walls of their hole, trying to hold himself, not smash against her again.

The explosions went on — forever.

* * *

"Report casualties," the lieutenant ordered on net as soon as the last rocket was down. On her screen, Mary could see him out of his hole, bounding for third squad.

No one else was moving.

The lieutenant came to a halt at the edge of a torn and pocked area. Here, the rill was gone, broadened into a ten meter hole made up of a lot of little ones. "Third squad, you've lost two men and the laser rifle." Mary knew it was a man and a woman, two kids who'd played one too many vid game.

"Lieutenant," Mary said, voice even, "I've got traffic moving in front of us."

"How much?"

"Twenty wheeled vehicles."

"Pick two, wide apart and give'em a rocket." The LT's words were bitter cold.

She'd never heard anyone talk quite that way. But then, Mary'd never been around when murder was decided upon.

She selected two rigs, a bit out in front of the rest. By triangulating her vid, she got a good range and position on them without using a laser to range find. She felt nothing. "Fire in hole twelve," she called . . . just another day at the mine.

"Clear," the lieutenant shot back.

Cold as death, Mary watched the two missiles process as dots across her display. She didn't switch on the laser designator until the missiles were over the rim. She only highlighted the vehicles when they were half way there. For a moment the missiles did not respond, then they changed direction. Mary grinned as the projected courses intersected the rigs.

Alarms must have gone off in the vehicles when the designators hit them. Plums of dust shot out as they accelerated and turned. They popped chaff — too late. Several battlesuited figures tumbled out of the rigs. A laser bolt shot up — missed.

The missiles hit. Parts of rig and bodies cartwheeled in slow arcs. Mary zoomed a video in on both scenes, passed them along. Let everybody see the payback. There were cheers on net. Mary studied the picture, imprinting it solid. How many times in the mines had she swallowed whatever the owners handed out. She'd stood, clinched jawed and taken it. *Well, I'm not taking it any more. You got two of us. We got a lot more of you. Keep coming and there's more where that came from.*

"Lieutenant, can I have a couple more missiles?"

"Yeah," seconded her request from other people on net.

"We've made our point, sergeant. We'll need what we got in an hour or so." As the lieutenant headed back to his hole, Mary turned to the enemy. They'd gone to ground, rigs hiding in the cover of rocks, infantry scattered. "Okay, you bastards. Lets see how you take to getting your own nose bloodied."

* * *

"Where the hell did that come from?" The newly arrived commander of D company joined his battalion commander at the escarpment's edge, surveying the wreckage.

"I'd like to know." Longknife could feel the blood lust rising. They'd played him for a sucker — and he'd taken the bait. He wanted them dead. The question was, how

to do it without throwing troopers away. "Company commanders, report."

"Tran here."

"Lieutenant Cohen, B company commander."

"Where's . . ." Right, there'd been a laser cannon on one of the carriers — a company commander's rig. B company had a new commander. Longknife took a deep breath. "Slight change of plan. Send me back your carriers. Keep the infantry heading for the rim, but advance on foot, leapfrog, use fire and movement."

"Who do we fire at?" the lieutenant squeaked.

"Nobody, unless you see something. Just don't put too many people out in the open until we know what we're up against."

"Sorry, sir."

"No stupid questions, only stupid answers." And how stupid am I being? I'm not ready to put my tail between my legs and run, that's for sure. 'Course, it would be nice if those bastards in the pass just disappeared. "Move out fellows, and keep your heads down. You got an hour to reach the rim."

"Roger," came back to him. He went to the next item on his agenda. "Senior Pilot Nuu, when's the *Revenge* due back for a second shooting pass?"

"Don't know, Major. Whatever they ran into fried every sensor and antenna on the boats. Even lost a 9" gun. Some eager turret commander ran his laser out early. Got something in its eye. *Revenge* and company will be low when they go past here. You running into trouble?"

"Nothing we can't handle, but I wouldn't mind the navy slagging this pass from orbit."

"Sorry, hon."

"I'm having a busy day at the office. Call you later, friend." Ray clicked off. There might have been a whispered kiss just before the line went dead. He stowed it away somewhere behind his heart for later. Right now, he had a battle to win.

What the hell am I facing? The political officer had his own official party opinion. 'Course, Jolly had stayed behind to make sure Santiago pushed the rest of the troops forward.

But what was he facing? Really. "Major, Artillery here, we got tube artillery dialed in on the laser designators that got our two carriers. Mind if we take them out?"

"Do it." That took no thought.

The gun carriages behind him bucked. The tubes puffed fire silently. A moment later two chunks of the crater rim blew out. A raged cheer came over the artillery net.

* * *

"Artillery, what's your ammo situation?"

"We got five units of fire on the transports, but only loaded out half of one. Sure could use those carriers you just called back to bring up more ammo."

"They're yours. Now, I need some time to think. Don't bother me unless the devil himself shows up."

"No problem."

Major Longknife stood, legs apart, arms folded over his chest, eyes staring at the pass.

What have I got in front of me?

Damned if I know.

What do you know?

They had a damn good laser gunner who kept me from knowing more about them — who was no longer among the living. Gutsy — but knew damn little about his weapon. Only a green gunner would take on a sixty-four rocket salvo with no back up.

Are all the troops facing us that green? Would be nice. The deployment along that rill line was something only a green second louie would come up with. Are they there, or was he only supposed to think they were? The rockets had homed on the laser gun, and they'd homed right in on the rill. Could all that be a set up to sucker him in? The response to that salvo had been quick. Whoever coordinated it had delayed illuminating his targets to the last second. Smart move. Why two missiles? Did they have an ammunition problem, or had the salvo killed two troopers? Only real green troops would let battlefield deaths spark their response.

Everything pointed to green troops, but with surprises up their sleeves. *Wonder if they are green enough to surrender? Should have made an offer.* Longknife glanced at the wreckage of two carriers — too late now. "Santiago, I want my van up here fast. I need sensors pronto."

"It's moving now, sir. Some artillery with it."

"Tell my driver to put pedal to the metal. He'll love that order. I need analysis more than he needs an escort."

"Yes sir."

Major Longknife squinted at the pass. *Who are you? Have I pegged you right yet? How do I get you out of my way?*

* * *

Mary studied the situation in front of her. She'd been dumb not to move those designators as soon as she'd used them. She'd reprogrammed the videos to order the lasers to scoot back into their tunnels as soon as their targets were destroyed.

What else am I forgetting?

To surrender. But that was out of the question now. The two blasted rigs and the bodies around them had closed that door. She zoomed in on the solitary figure still standing, legs spread, arms folded across his chest. Mary couldn't make her own suit do that. *Wonder if that means their suits are better or worse than ours? Wonder if I offered that one, they'd all go home?* She doubted it. "Lieutenant, they're still coming but hopping. Should we toss a few more rockets at them?"

"Spread out, we wouldn't get many. We don't have enough to trade one rocket for three or four men. No, sergeant, we wait for them to bunch up again. Then we'll cut'em down."

Mary didn't like what she was hearing, but she couldn't fault his logic. She switched channels. "Lek, when are those reinforcements gonna get here?"

"They haven't left. Oh, they've pulled A company out of rummaging through luggage, but the transports are spread to hell and gone."

"What happened to that crazy lady who was going to put rockets down on the transports?"

Lek snorted. "She's got her rockets and got her command unit to program them, but the fire control computers don't have any power cables."

"Lek, don't tell me they need a special cable."

"Okay, I won't tell you."

"These apes could never run a mine."

"Ever move a mine half way across human space, off-load it three times at busy stations, shuffle the shipping containers and then try to get it put back together in two days? Mary, they're doing the best they can."

"Lek, we got guys hopping toward us that intend to kill us. Even your mild disposition has got to take offense at that."

"Ain't no use getting the dander up over what you can't do nothing about. Now you stay cool, young lady."

Only Lek would think of her as young or a lady. Mary again checked the situation before her. Nothing had changed, except the guys with guns were closer. No, there was more rigs on the plain, just their side of the escarpment. "Lieutenant, have you noticed the new stuff showing up back there?"

"Yes, sergeant. A full battery of six rocket launchers, six tube artillery and what looks like a command van. I watched them come up. I think the troop carriers they sent back are headed this way, probably loaded with more rockets and shells."

"How can you sound so damn calm?" Mary snapped. "They're gonna flatten us."

"Cause I got no rockets with the range," he answered her like she might a newbie in the mines. "All we can do is hit them where we can and take what they throw at us."

"We can hit them." Mary whispered the secret.

"With what?"

"We've got four SS-12's. They've got a range of fifteen klicks, don't they?"

"You bunch of pot-bellied, sticky-fingered jokers walked off with four SS-12's." The lieutenant sounded almost giddy.

"Well we had to have something up our sleeves, lieutenant."

The kid was laughing. "I love you crazy bunch of military disasters. Where're the 12's set up?"

"In the rill, with the rest of the rockets."

"That makes it ten clicks to the escarpment, another one or two to the targets. I'd been thinking of wheeling a couple of 3's into the gap to see if they could do something. Now, we got four that can really do the job."

"Shall I lay in coordinates and launch them?"

There was a long pause. Mary wondered if the young man had not heard her. "Lieutenant, should I . . ." she started slowly.

"No Mary. Let me think for a minute." He was really letting his hair down, what little his buzz haircut left him. He'd even called her Mary. "You've been a miner all your life, Mary. You ever find an ore vein and have to wait to flush it out? Is there any mineral that has to be aged in place?"

"No sir." The LT knew nothing about mining.

"My instructors said timing was everything. Now I think I understand. If we blast their artillery now, they can adjust their battle plan for what's left. No, Mary, we wait until they commit. Wait until there's a lot of junk in the air and they won't know what to hit with a laser bolt. No battle plan survives contact with the enemy. Let's wait and make that poor bastard's plan go to hell in a hand basket."

Mary grinned, the kid did know how to fight. She went back to her display. The advancing infantry were moving faster, made bold by the lack of attention. She focused on the guy who'd spent such a long time staring her way. He was moving toward a big, boxy rig with a garden of antenna's on its top and side. The lieutenant said a command van had arrived. She could spot only one of those boxy bad-hair-day things. That made it the command van, and that fellow the guy giving the orders to kill them. *You're management. You die first.*

* * *

Now, how do I fight this damn battle?

Major Longknife stepped into his command van. His four staff officers were busy bringing their boards up to date. Most of what the boards showed he'd watched with his

own eyes. Here, it was displayed by platoons and with rate of advance precisely calculated. His troops would be at the rim in ten minutes.

Longknife rested a hand on his sensor coordinator. "Tanaka, there's something out there I can't figure out."

"Yeah, I watched that attack from the artillery net. They got this place wired, but they're either load limited or low on expendables. I would have targeted every troop carrier out there. Why just two buggies?"

"I've been asking myself that for the last hour. Haven't got an answer yet. You?"

"No sir."

"What I can do is adapt, scatter the troops until they're not worth a rocket, and next time we go in, make sure their laser illuminators aren't worth a damn." The Major chinned his mike, "Artillery, what's your smoke situation."

"Maybe not as good as I thought it was. We biased the unit of fire for the real thing. I've got WP, but maybe not as much as we could use."

"Tell base camp to load extra smoke on the resupply run."

"Santiago's already got the troop carriers headed back."

"Tell him he's too damn fast. Turn the last carrier around and have it reloaded with White Phosphorus."

"Yes sir,"

"Okay, folks, here's what we're gonna do." And together, the Major and his team started putting together the familiar pieces that had won the 2nd so many battles before.

* * *

Mary was kicking herself. She'd concentrated so much on defending the platoon's position, she hadn't put that much thinking into defending herself. Most of the riflemen headed her way would hit the rim on the other side of the gap or damn close to it on this side. Still about forty would wash up on the other side of her and walk by her place on their way to the gap.

What were the chances they wouldn't notice my hidey hole?

Damn slim, with a centimeter gap on both sides of the door. Mary called up the map of the rim's innards. There were other chambers; quickly she sent the moles digging. She needed a bolt hole. Things were getting complicated.

* * *

Captain Santiago scowled at the returning troop carrier that now was an ammunition carrier. The driver had to be crazy to race a carrier, overloaded with explosives, but this one was. It made a hard left turn and slid to a rocking halt not five feet from the loading dock. The driver was out of it in a flash.

"Major wants smoke," the excited driver shouted, forgetting his commlink carried a whisper just as well. "He's got enough high explosive. You got to reload me quick with Willy Peter."

Santiago threw open the rear door to the carrier. Forty shells in their plastic cradles were crammed on the floor. Every shell was stamped with a WP/V, white phosphorus modified for vacuum, or Willy Peter, if you preferred. Each round was laced with crystals to dazzle lasers and heat to blind infrared sensors. A perfect screen for a man to hide behind on a battle field. "Damn it. You *are* loaded with Willy Peter."

The driver looked over the captain's shoulder. "Nobody told me what I was carrying, sir. Artillery just said come back."

Santiago gritted his teeth; artillery wouldn't know any better. There'd been no time to inventory the load out to each carrier. He'd assumed artillery wanted it fast. To hell with the paperwork. It had worked — except for this load.

"Soldier, now you know what you got. You are a bat out of hell, so drive like one and get this chaff up the line."

The trooper whirled, bounced off the carrier as he overshot his 180 degree turn. He took two running steps that didn't sit well with the moon's lower gravity and snagged the door to the driver's station before he fell flat on his face. Pulling himself into the seat, the rig was moving before the door closed.

Captain Santiago chinned his mike. "Artillery, I got a load of WP headed your way just slightly below light speed. I'll have a couple of more loads waiting for you as soon as you get me some rigs to put them in."

"We'll unload them fast on this end. Thanks for the quick turn around. I figured you for another five minutes."

"Don't thank me, thank the driver. Assuming the kid doesn't nose dive into a crater. Santiago out." No use telling him he could've had the WP ten minutes sooner if he hadn't sent the kid in circles. In the eons of time and space, ten minutes wouldn't matter. Santiago tasted the lie. He'd been under fire; he knew how long a minute could be.

* * *

Mary checked the outside situation. In the last five minutes they'd gotten closer. Here and there, pairs of soldiers had reached the rim and waited. Inside, the moles had found a place that might save her life — if they had enough time to do their thing. They were chomping away happily on rocks, leaving Mary to wonder if she'd finally given away too much, taken too little. Cassie was always telling her she couldn't make everyone happy. Mary swallowed hard and checked outside.

Troops were bunching up as they reached the rim. That promoted them to targets, but not easy ones. Mary had a mole redrill a hole for an extreme downward slant and sent a designator into it. A one second light up was all she risked before sending it scuttling back deep into the rock. The Unity artillery still had time to get a fix; a shell smashing where it had been ten seconds ago.

The designator squealed as it shook. Still, it reported available when things settled down. Mary was none to happy with the test; the targeting beam had still been ten meters out from the foot of the rim. Well, rockets needed a place to explode and scatter flechettes. That would have to do. She got six moles moving to redeploy lasers. More and more hostiles were at the rim, staying fairly spread out, but still worth a rocket.

"Lieutenant, I think I'm going to need a few missiles in a minute or two."

"We'll have to do this quick. Their artillery has a hair trigger," As if she hadn't noticed. "Sergeant, you also have company."

"Yes, sir," Mary growled. "If you give me a half dozen rockets, I can send one my way without making a spectacle of myself."

"The rockets are yours. Good shooting."

This shoot would have to be timed to the split second. "Lek, I need six missiles programmed for a quick U turn as they come out of the canisters. Can you do it?"

"Piece of cake, miner. I can hold them to a one klick pop up. They'll go a few klicks out, then turn back. How do you think the Unies will take to getting rockets in

their backside?"

"Maybe they'll bitch to whoever's running those guns and give them a good case of 'Did I do that?'" Mary managed a chuckle. While Lek finished his programing, the moles dug her hiding place.

"They're yours," Lek came back on. "Use two on the rifles at your doorstep."

So the others knew her predicament. Moisture rimmed Mary's eyes. Hadn't been many in her life who cared, certainly not when the missile that saved her life might be the one that wasn't there to save his. Blinking the water away, Mary got back to business. "Three to each side of the crater, and only one on my doorstep. Don't want to hang a welcome mat out."

"You got a fallback position, Mary?" Lek asked.

"Working on one now."

"Take care."

"If I was careful, I wouldn't be here," Mary breathed as she switched off. She did one more check. Lasers were warm, but not in place. She edged them forward. Holding her breath, she punched six missiles out.

* * *

"Rocket's incoming," sensors shouted.

Major Longknife twisted around to face the sensor station. "Any laser designators?"

"None pointing. I got strange electromagnetic emissions, but they don't match anything in the Earthies inventory."

"Artillery," Longknife kept his voice even, "I want WP out there. Air burst at a hundred meters."

"On the way."

"Any laser rifles in range?"

"Two LR's at maximum range."

"Not much help. Artillery, as soon as the lasers light up, I want them smashed"

"We got twelve rounds of Willy Peter out there." Artillery reported, "and we're reloading with High Explosive. Few problems can't be solved with a round of HE."

"Good." Longknife settled back. It would be a battle between their measures and his countermeasures. He glanced at sensor's board; the rockets stayed low. A laser missed. It's target was turning back. "They're aimed at the rim. Of course."

* * *

Mary waited for the missiles to start their turn back to the rim before she lit off the designators. One by one the six red dots on her heads-up display turned to green. *Target acquired.*

Then all hell broke lose.

The infrared sensors lit up like a fire. The lasers chirped in protest as the missiles' dots turned black. *Targets not acquired.* Quick, Mary changed to vid. Giant puffs of white stuff blossomed a half klick from the rim, blocking the lasers.

"Willy Peter, Mary," the LT's voice filled her helmet. "They've blanketing you with white phosphorous. Thick to stop lasers, hot to stop infrared. It'll settle, but in low grav, not very fast. The missiles should home on where they were targeted, I hope. Douse your lasers and get them out of there."

Right, Mary had read about WP as a counter-measure for lasers. Damn, why hadn't she thought about it? Quickly she ordered her lasers to scoot back. On second thought, she ordered everything to scoot. Rocks around her shook. Her missiles were hitting something. Then the chamber really shuddered. Mary danced around like an upped hopper, wishing she had the drugs in her that gave the hoppers the energy as well as the oblivion.

* * *

Major Longknife scowled. "Check fire, check fire. Flying rocks are doing their job for'em."

"Roger." The artillery barrage ceased. The rain of rocks and boulders on his troops stopped. *Wonder how many sensors we killed? How many of our own troops?* Damn war.

The incoming rockets had been bad enough. A laser rifle had gotten only one.

Some ballsie assault rifle had clipped another. It hadn't done much good, inertia kept the pieces going in loose formation. Most troops had taken off hopping as soon as it was clear where a rocket was heading. Still flechettes had gotten too many, and the rockets flight had been short. Unspent solid fuel, still flaming, had speckled others. Plasti-armor that could stop a flechettes burned if heated enough. The computer took the injured off net, but not before the first horrible screams. *War never got easy.*

"Artillery, you got any empty carriers?"

"Some. Was about to head them back for more smoke and HE."

"Hang red crosses, stars and crescents on'em and send them out there."

"You don't think they'll shoot'em?"

"Won't know what kind of war these folks came to fight until we see, will we?"

"Right sir, I'll ask for life saver volunteers."

"Get'em out there, and get your gunners ready. I'm gonna start the show any time now."

The ambulances were a mercy — and a mission. Buddies were caring for buddies. So long as first aid was the priority, combat was a distant second. But once their mates were turned over to the medics, the blood lust would come flooding back to the survivors. The Major glanced around. His artillery was ready. D and E companies were ready to roll. Get the wounded off the field and it would be time. Longknife gave himself ten minutes.

* * *

Mary risked two vids. The scene they showed was horrible.

Two hundred people had been huddled under the rim when the missiles came. There were still two hundred battle suits out there, but a lot of them weren't people anymore.

She'd never considered unspent rocket fuel a weapon. Burning figures withered on the ground, trying to put out fire that carried its own oxidizer. The lucky ones sluffed the fuel off as they rolled in the dust. No, the lucky were the ones just lying there, dead and burning.

"God, what have I done?"

A red light flashed, drawing her attention to the top of the picture. Wheeled vehicles were making their way down the escarpment. They were going slower than she'd expect for an attack rush, but Mary no longer trusted anything in battle to be reasonable. "Lieutenant, we got wheels headed our way."

"Show me."

Happy to get away from the close-in picture, Mary zoomed on a pair of the approaching rigs.

"No shooting this time, Mary. Those carriers have red crosses on'em. They're ambulances, come for the wounded. We don't shoot at red crosses."

No way would Mary shoot at something come to take those wretched pictures out of her vision. She shuddered; it would take more than ambulances to get them out of her memory. She'd burned and slashed and killed them. And they'd do the same to her if they got a chance. "Lieutenant, mind taking over the big picture for a while. I got housekeeping chores to do."

"Dig deep, Mary. We've got a truce while the ambulances are on the field. I'll mind the store."

Mary started looking for places to hide.

* * *

"They're leaving the ambulances alone," sensors whispered as if even a strong word might disturb the delicate peace.

"Might as well. They know we know how to cover vehicles now," Artillery butted in.

"Let's credit virtue where its due," Ray muttered. "Artillery, your crew ready?"

"Just say the word."

"Enough of the right stuff?"

"I'd like more WP, but you know where my ammo carriers are."

"Yeah."

"Sir," whispered sensors, "shouldn't we go now? The more time we give them,

the better dug in they'll be."

"Yes son, but B and C companies are out of it. Their officers and non-coms need time to put them back into fighting order. D and E are our reserves, but only E's got armored carriers. I don't want to send them forward until B and C are in solid contact. And I got a flag of truce on the field. They're honoring it and I don't intend to make this war any viler than it has to be. We will honor our own flag of truce."

"Yes sir."

"But that doesn't mean we don't think for the next ten minutes. We've tapped them. They've tapped us. To hell with love taps. I want a knockout next. So far, I don't even know what I'm up against."

"Sir, I think I've got something," said sensors slowly.

"I'm listening."

"I told you the background electromagnetic noise from the rim didn't match any stuff in the Earthies inventory."

"Right."

"I think I got a picture of what these folks are using." Ray's heads-up changed to an up-close picture of the rim. Shells had gouged it; something dangled from the rock.

"What's that?" Artillery asked.

"It's not military issue," sensors answered. "It took a Major search of the database to find. It's the latest commercial infrared sensor. They use it in mines. It cost a fortune."

"We're facing mining equipment?" Artillery wasn't persuaded.

"It looks like that to me." Sensors stood his ground.

"That might explain a lot," Longknife said slowly. "They've dug in faster than I expected. They've got a few savvy types and a lot of dumb ones. And all of them are green. Okay, crew. What do we do with that assumption? We got ten minutes before I want to kick this off, talk to me."

Ten minutes can go quickly when experts at organized mayhem put their minds to it.

* * *

The seconds ticked by Mary, each one an hour long and not nearly long enough. She had nothing to do while the moles did their thing. Into that time-twisted void crept visions of the hell Mary had created. She didn't turn on the vid. She didn't have to. All her life, Mary had been . . . well, if not a good girl, at least a woman who kept out of trouble. Go to work. Give the man his time. Don't talk back. And cover your mouth when you laugh at the boss man or brown-noser as they get theirs.

Mary got what she deserved. A few beers with friends. A few parties. Here and there a night worth remembering. That was life, thank you very much. Now she had killed. Good God, how she had killed. Now she could pray. Pray that there was no god to see what she'd done. Outside were people, buddies of the ones she'd killed. All she had to do was open the door. They'd find her. One shot from a needle rifle and she wouldn't have to worry about forgetting the pictures. One shot, hell. They'd probably empty their magazines into her. She wouldn't feel a thing.

Mary fingered the door. The jacks would swivel it. They'd do the rest. Through her trembling fingertips, Mary felt movement on the other side. They were coming for her.

* * *

"Sergeant, take a look at this."

"Private, get a move on. We're wanted at the pass."

"Nothin's gonna happen 'til the ambulances are out of here. Take a look, sergeant. There's a hole in the rock."

"There's holes all over this damn rock."

"Yeah, but not in a straight line."

"Straight line?" The sergeant had gone outside of the rock outcropping. The private had taken the inside. Two other privates had joined him by the time the sergeant got back.

"Shit, look." The second private fingered the gap in the rocky wall. "It's straight, and as wide as my little finger."

"You mean prick," put in the third private.

"You're just jealous, honey. I got one and you don't." He leaned against the rock. "Doesn't move."

"Honey, you never could make the earth move, now me, baby cakes, I can make it shake, rattle and roll." She patted her hips, or more precisely, the satchel of explosives hanging there. "Move out of my way, boy, and I'll show you how a woman does it."

"Hold your horses, Roz," the sergeant put in as he joined them. "We got ambulances on the field. Nobody blows nothing while we're under the Red Crescent."

"Course, Roz, if you got your heart set on blowing something, I'm available."

"Go blow yourself, before I use some C-20 to do it for you. Sergeant, somebody's had us under observation since we started. That somebody's caused us a lot of grief. If that somebody's behind this rock, I want his ass."

"Okay, Roz, I'll call it up, but close that satchel. Nobody does nothin' til I get the word. Understood?"

"Yes, sergeant," three privates echoed like good four-year-olds.

* * *

Mary waited for the door to blow in, crush her under its stony weight. "Mary," Cassie's voice whispered in her helmet, "you've been off net for a long time. You okay?"

"Yes," Mary sniffled. "No problem here."

"Doesn't sound like no problem to me."

"Okay, you want a problem. How do you blow your nose in one of these damn ape suits."

"You got me. Don't think they made them with crying in mind. Want me to ask the lieutenant?"

"For god sakes, no!"

"Want to talk about it, Mary?"

She sniffed hard, trying to get control of all the drips. Then she sneezed,

splattering phlegm all over the inside of her faceplate. Most of it ran down in thin streaks. The face plate was supposed to be streak free. It almost was. The suit already stank of fear and sweat.

"I just killed a lot of people," Mary finally said.

"So, that's what they sent us here to do."

"No, *I just killed a lot of people*. I saw them. Laying out there burning."

"I know," Cassie whispered, "I saw the vid, too."

"But I'm the one that killed them."

"Yeah, I know. You laid out the sensors all by yourself. Emplaced the rockets, programmed them. Did it all yourself. Good going, girl."

"I'm sorry."

"No you're not, Mary. If we hadn't blasted those two rigs, if we hadn't stomped them at the rim, they'd have rolled right over us a half hour ago. How many of us would be dead? Me, Lek, Nan, Dumont, definitely the lieutenant. How many, Mary?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I. But you saved our asses, Mary, and we're kind of glad for it. Now, you go take care of yourself, girl."

"Thanks, Cassie, it's good to know someone cares. I owe you a beer."

"Then you definitely take care of yourself. I need all the free beer I can get at my age."

"Cassie, I got a few things to do. Call you back in a couple of minutes."

"If you don't, I'll call you. We need you, girl. Dig in good. If anybody knows how, you do."

"Thanks, Mary out." Mary glanced around her cell. Not much bigger than her apartment in the belt. Over there was room for the bed. The cook space was opposite it. The couch would go against the door leaving a whole wall for the vid center. *Where do I hide, under the bed or in the closet?*

The moles must have finished. The jacks skittered away from the original door and headed for a corner. Mary got down on her hands and knees. *Yeah, under the bed sounded good.* She grabbed her gun and started crawling.

THREE

"B Company, report," Major Longknife ordered.

"Locked and loaded. We want their skulls for hood ornaments."

The Major would have expected nothing less. "C Company, report.

"In position. There better be enough skulls for us, too. Damned if I'll settle for their guts as antenna streamers again."

"There'll be enough. Where're the ambulances?"

"Last one just cleared the escarpment . . . now."

"Artillery, they're yours. D and E companies, forward at a gallop. B and C, as soon as the smoke thickens, advance and take the pass."

"Roger," "Yes, sir," and "On our way," answered him.

"Lieutenant Cohen," the Major called the new commander of B company. "Your folks pretty sure they've found the skunk that's been calling down all those rockets?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you don't have to wait for smoke to go after that one. That's a skull I want, personally."

"It's yours, sir" the young voice held no doubt.

* * *

Mary felt the pressure of the explosion even through vacuum. She checked her heads-up display one last time before she doused it, and the hint of light it brought to the cavern. It was all red, hot and ready. *Damn. The mines!* She'd safetied them for

the LT's walk. With a flick of her wrist, she reactivated them. *Then* she doused the heads-up.

Mary eyed her old space through the slit she'd left open to her new quarters. The stone slab lay half in, half out of the doorway. Three grenades sailed through the hole. Mary ducked. Through the stone, she felt the explosions and shrapnel bouncing off walls. Something slammed into her helmet. Carefully, she fingered a bit of jagged metal sticking in the plastic of her face plate. Bent and twisted, it had ricochet off the walls before coming to rest, spent, on her helmet. With a glob of goo in one hand, she gently pulled the metal out. It had barely dinged the plastic. Mary, never one to take a chance, slapped goo liberally on the ding and risked a look into her old space.

Four infantry, rifles at the ready, entered one after another. Rifles and helmets moving as one, they swept down the entire cavern. Not one square millimeter went unexamined. *So that's how professionals do it.* Three stayed on point and alert. One relaxed his aim, probably a sergeant getting ready to report. Mary didn't want that. She flipped on the laser designator high on the far wall. In its ruddy light, the dust and gasses of the explosion still swirled. Like puppets, every gun and eye swivelled to face it.

Mary slipped her needle rifle into the notch left for it below the slit. Her heads-up display back on, it showed the next room. The sights settled on the closest back. Mary squeezed the trigger, gently, like she'd been taught.

The gas vented out the sides of her rifle; she felt no recoil. A three round burst went into one back. Mary walked her aim to the next closest back. Three more for it, then the next.

That one wasn't a back. She caught him — no, maybe it was a her, turning. Mary stitched three rounds into her side and changed aim for the last one. He was diving for the cover of the stone. Mary had to get him; she couldn't hold off a siege. His helmet was in her sights. She jerked off three rounds. Only the first one hit. It was enough.

The faceplate shattered.

Mary lay, rifle in hand, fascinated as the blood flew in lazy arcs, obedient to the gentle gravity of this moon. She might have laid there, mesmerized by the deaths she'd made, but explosions were seeping into her body.

Her mines were going off.

She ordered a vid to keep an eye on her old space and put it on motion

detection. Switching her heads-up to the outside picture, she nodded. Yep, the mine field was taking a toll. There was still too much of the WP stuff to use a laser. It took her a minute to regain the situation. Somewhere in that minute she was violently ill, but she kept most of the vomit off her faceplate. Her friends needed her.

* * *

Lieutenant Cohen waited for the cloud of Willy Peter to thicken. After each burst of shell, he'd start counting. When he got to fifteen without starting over, the swirl of white obscured the end of the pass — and he could believe the artillery net's claim that the barrage was over.

"Follow me, crew." and the men and women of B company lit out after him. He was near the crest of the ridge when something exploded at his feet. Arms and legs flailing, he flew up, then smashed into the pass's stone wall five meters above the ground. Of his feet, he felt nothing. His ears rang, but not enough to miss the hissing of pressure fleeing his suit. With his last air, he shouted. "Come on soldiers, a few mines can't slow the Guard down. Show the others how it's done. Forward."

Troops double-timed toward him, some shooting up as explosions blossomed at their feet, others making it through, rifles up, shooting at what lay ahead. Then darkness took vision from the lieutenant's eyes as his whole body struggled for breath. It was not a long struggle.

* * *

Each shell bounced Cassie around the inside of her dugout. As best she could, she left space for Joyce to do her own rattling around. Then the lieutenant bellowed on the platoon wide net. "Infantry in the gap. Heads up. Rifles out. Shoot."

She and Joyce stared at each other. Did that idiot really want them to crawl out of their hole under this artillery barrage? Then again, the place wasn't shaking anymore. Just her knees. Through the face plate, Cassie could see Joyce's face, sweat ran down it, vomit speckled the helmet. She was in no shape to stand up, much less shoot. *Wonder what I look like?*

I sure as hell don't feel like standing up and aiming a gun. Cassie was shaking like an unbalanced motor. "I'll fire a shot if you will," Cassie made the offer.

"Just one."

"That's all I got in me."

They came up out of their hole together, slapped their rifles down on the rocky lip and fired. Cassie didn't try for a sight picture. She just pulled the trigger and held it down, slowly sweeping the barrel over the gap three hundred meters away. Figures in armored spacesuits poured through the gap. Some flew . . . mines, she remembered. Good luck, Mary.

Her rifle quit spitting. For Mary, she popped the spent magazine out and slammed in a new one. Cassie glanced at Joyce. She slumped over her rifle, surprise still showing in her empty eyes. Her face plate had taken a direct hit. She hadn't suffered. A needle's tiny hole showed between her eyes.

Cassie turned back to the gap, finger on the trigger, gun venting. She wondered why her throat hurt. It wasn't until she slipped the fourth magazine in that she realized she was screaming. She didn't try to stop.

* * *

Captain Tran did a belly flop in the dust at the end of the pass. He'd made it! From the looks of things, he might be the only officer who had. Company B was taking a pasting. They'd always been a hard luck unit. Tough luck. The rifle fire on his side of the gap was lighter. "First and second platoon, keep going. Third and fourth give them fire support. When they've got the rill, third and fourth will leapfrog over them."

Shouts answered him. A dozen men took off hopping. *Was that all that was left of the forty who jumped off with him at the escarpment?*

Eight made it to the rill. They ducked down and started looking for hidey holes. "It's like shooting fish in a bowl," came over the net. Tran would give them a minute, then order third and fourth up and forward.

* * *

Dumont held Tina. "I can't go out there," she whimpered.

"Don't worry, hon, we ain't going nowhere. No LT's gonna make us."

"They shot her," came a scream on squad net. "They shot her right in our . . ."

"That was . . ." Tina started.

"Yeah," Dumont cut her off. Har had the hole right down from them. Dumont raised his helmet just enough to see. Someone in brown space armor was emptying his rifle into that hole. Unthinking, Dumont pulled his gun out, sighted quickly and blew

the gunner away. Someone on the lip of the rill turned towards him. Dumont walked his fire up to blow him off his feet.

Needles stitched the other side of the rill's wall. Dumont ducked before they got him. Needles ricochet all over the place, but none hit him.

"Du, what is it?"

"Hon, if you want to live, you got to kill'em. It's us or them time. Tina, can you stand up a bit more and see what's coming up behind me?"

Trembling, she did.

"See anything?"

"No."

"Good girl. Now something's coming up the rill behind you. Don't turn around. I'm gonna get'em." He edged his gun out a bit. The vid on it relayed the sight picture to his heads-up. Nothing. He pushed the gun a bit more. There was someone, down a ways, hiding behind a twist in the rill. Not much to aim at. He held the gun with both hands and pulled the trigger. His target fell, kicking and trying to slap his wounds. Dumont put two rounds through its helmet. It didn't move anymore.

Using his gun camera for a sweep, Dumont spotted nothing more at either end of the rill. Lying on his back he pushed out — hoping the whole time his suit would hook on something and keep him in his hole. Nothing. Crouching, he risked a peak above the wall of the rill. Four dudes hopped forward, firing at the old ladies in the holes behind him. Without thought, Dumont swung his gun over the four, trigger finger locked down. They folded over backwards. He felt Tina's hand on his shoulder. "What do you want me to do, Du?"

"Cover my back. I'll take care of our front." One of the four bodies rolled over, grabbing for the gun nearby. Dumont shot him through the soles of his feet.

* * *

Captain Tran blinked. First and second platoons were gone. Just gone. He needed artillery before he'd order another assault. He crawled to the crest of the pass to get a line-of-sight on Artillery. Climbing up on his knees, he got a signal from the artillery net — and a needle in the back.

It went right through him, leaving a tiny hole that bubbled blood into vacuum. He

grabbed for a patch even as he fell. Front hole covered, he wondered how he'd handle the back. Two troopers crawled up behind him. One slapped his back. The pressure in his helmet quit dropping.

"Don't worry, sir, we'll get you back. They grabbed him by the shoulders and hustled him over the crest and down the other side, past blown mines and body parts. He glanced around. There were lots of wounded being helped by one or two friends, all headed back. Here and there a single soldier, no wound visible, no wounded comrade apparent, drifted back. The battle was over for B and C company. D and E would have to take the pass.

Tran glanced up. D and E were rolling forward, maybe three or four more clicks out. D and E would do it.

Then their carriers started blowing apart.

* * *

Mary studied her display. The platoon had held against two hundred. Now another two hundred were coming up. It was time to do something — or surrender.

She'd watched Dumont's squad hunker in their holes, trying to make their own separate peace. Half of them were dead for that. Surrender was no option today.

"Lieutenant, Rodrigo here. I want missile release."

"How many, sergeant?"

"All you got."

There was a pause . . . while the LT thought. No, the background of the pause carried the ping, ping, ping of a rifle. He was breathless when he came back on. "They're yours, Mary. We're too busy. Use'em well."

Mary counted her targets. Twenty carriers, half of them tracked — that meant armored — raised dust plumes as they raced towards her. She had to get them. But there were laser rifles on several of them. These missiles would have to fight their way in. *Okay, flood them, like they flooded us.* Then there was the artillery. She'd heard the platoon whimper under its merciless, impersonal pounding. She'd also heard the screams as they died. *Artillery is gonna pay. And that big square box owes me. Owes me big time.*

The WP stuff was settling. Maybe they'd run out. Mary would not take that

chance. She fed solid coordinates into the four SS-12's, offsetting their course so they'd be a deflection shot until the last second. The rigs were different, coming in fast, they kept their intervals. That made them predictable. She assigned the SS-3's areas to search if they lost laser lock.

All the missiles were rigged to one launch button. She shouted "Fire in the Hole," and pushed it. Behind her, in two salvos, they leaped from their canisters. Twisting into immediate turns, they cleared the ridge by maybe one hundred meters, hungry for targets. Mary lit off every designator she had. This was it. But she didn't just play them on targets. She'd learned; these guys must have had some kind of warning system. Those first two had taken off dodging as soon as she'd illuminated them. She programmed the lasers to play around the targets, ten meters to the right or left. Close enough the missiles would know where to fly. Not so close the rigs didn't keep racing forward — unwarned.

Here and there, a laser bolt shot upwards, but the missiles were not coming head on. Making a deflection shot at this rate of closure, jostling in the speeding carriers, nobody scored.

Ten seconds to impact, Mary had the lasers light up their targets. Rigs began to twist. They were going too fast. Two bolts took missiles head on, but that close, the wreckage of the missile was just as deadly as an undamaged one.

As a cheer went up on platoon net, Mary concentrated on the four remaining missiles. The SS-12's reached out to the plain. *Two for rockets, one for guns. One for . . . No, I can't commit one missile to just that command rig. But it looks soft enough. Maybe if I target the gun closest to it?*

Mary grinned and set her designators.

* * *

"Major, missiles in the air," sensors shouted.

"Artillery, give me WP now and plenty of it."

"Don't got any. Carrier just pulled in. We're off loading it straight to a tube. Damn, we needed it ten minutes ago."

"Get it out there." Ray turned back to the battle. Assault rigs still ran arrow straight across the broken terrain. Dumb. "Sensors, did you pass the missile alert to them."

"Didn't want to juggle their elbow, Major. They've got their own warning system beeping in their ears."

"Don't look like it. Tell'em for me."

"Yes, sir." There was a pause. When sensors came back, his voice was low, like a man who'd bet his wife and lost. "Sir, the beepers went off as I started talking."

On the plain before him, speeding carriers started to turn. Laser rifles fired. From where Longknife stood he would see the twisty way the misses came in, making the gunners' job damn near impossible. Carriers started exploding. Here a missile went wide. There a rig dodged. One slid sideways into a boulder. The missile smashed against the rock. Troopers poured out of the demolished carrier — some running — too many crawling. Unable to look away, the Major watched in disbelief as sixteen of his troop carriers met the missiles head on. Nothing survived the collision. *But those carriers each had ten of my troops!*

"Major, Tran here, request permission to withdraw B and C company." There was a tremble in the officer's voice. He was hit, or had just watch D and E company die — or both.

"Permission granted. Get back here any way you can. We'll lay artillery on their positions."

"Thanks, sir."

"I'll try to get some transport out there for you."

"Don't bother, sir. We'd rather walk."

"Major, we got four more missiles incoming," sensors squeaked.

"To where?" The Major came heads up.

"Us!"

Longknife swung himself out of the van. No damn Earth platoon had missiles with that range. What was he facing? Why hadn't they used them sooner? Was this the start of a counter attack? The missiles were above him. Jets of fire pushing them over, plunging them down. No laser bolts rose to meet them. All the rifles went with D and E. *After all, they were going in harms way. We were sitting back here safe and sound.*

"Duck, you idiot," somebody called.

Whether to the Major or some other idiot, Ray didn't know. But he hadn't ducked and he was an idiot. He ducked, shouting "Staff, bail out. Take cover." In the low gravity of this moon, ducking took a while. He was only half way down when the rockets started hitting.

Strange how you fall slow in low gravity, but explosions move just as fast. To his left, a rocket launcher was halfway through reloading when the missile hit. With its own rockets not yet in the armored launch canister, not one but nine rockets blew. Fuel, flechettes, and jagged chunks of wreckage flew, consuming another launcher, stripping a gun mount of its crew. White Phosphorus blew in all directions, taking out a second gun.

As if awed by that spectacle, the next two hits were hardly noticeable. One rocket hit one launcher. Another rocket demolished a gun. Then the fourth missile hit. It had the Major's name, rank, and serial number on it.

Landing between two guns, its shower of flechettes wiped out half their crews. That covered two thirds of the perimeter of expanding gas and plastic. The Major and the command van took the rest. Pain came from a half dozen pin pricks. Worse, they threw him against the bumper of the van. Something crunched, and he quit hurting. *I don't want to quit hurting.* For the moment, he had no choice.

It seemed like a year before people started hopping around among the fire and debris. Two found him. "You hurt, Major?"

"Mind patching these holes? My arms aren't working and my ears are popping." They pulled patches out of the med pouch on his belt; his air quit getting thinner. As they lifted him off the bumper and settled him on a stretcher, he got a glance at the inside of the van. He'd only caught the low edge of the explosion. His staff, still at their stations, had taken the full force. They were pinned to the front wall like the target at some fairground knife throwing show.

The knife thrower had made a lot of mistakes.

"Can you help my team?"

"Yessir," the private answered. Through his faceplate, Longknife saw the sergeant just shake his head.

Longknife could still chin his mike. "Artillery, I want fire on their position to cover our troops withdrawal."

No answer.

"Artillery? Is anybody on net. Who's in charge?"

"I guess I am, sir. Second Lieutenant Divoba. I can lay sixty-four missiles on them right now, but we need a minute to get a tube manned."

"Hold your missiles, son. We're not trying to win a battle, we just want to keep their heads down while we walk away. Use your tube artillery, and back your rockets off ten clicks. Now do it, son."

The pain was coming back.

"You want a shot, sir?"

"Not 'til I'm on ship."

"We can get you on one of the carriers heading out now, sir," the sergeant offered.

"I ride the last one, sergeant. You want to take an earlier one?"

"Nosir." It was nice to see a sergeant smile the way they did when they found an officer doing what an officer should. Longknife hoped that smile wouldn't cost him his life.

"Private, you want to take an early ride?"

"Nosir," his voice broke, but he got the word out. Poor kid. Stuck with two seniors playing it out by the code. Ray knew he ought to order the kid out, but he might need him to carry him. A cannon shell arched over the Major's line of sight. Usually he would have felt the ground shake. *I must be real bad*. The sergeant twisted around to follow the shell for a moment. He got a good view of the troops struggling back from the pass. "Looks pretty bad, sir."

"We've been in some tough ones. We always come through."

Then it got worse.

* * *

"Captain Andy," Umboto chortled, "I got six missiles ready to have a go at those transports. I had to teach them their numbers on pencil and paper. I've tucked them in at night and booted them out of bed for the last eternity, but *they are ready!* Permission

to launch, sir."

"You may launch when ready, Commander."

Captain Anderson glanced around his HQ. It had gone from a morgue to damn near looking like a winning celebration on election night — one of those rare ones where they beat the polls. On his display, the captain watched six dots leave the crater and march slowly toward the enemy's grounded transports. With them gone, the enemy troops would have but two choices. Fight on with air getting stale, or surrender.

From the reports he'd been getting back from 1st platoon of A company, the Colonials were just about fought out.

* * *

"Everybody, get your head down," Mary shouted. "We got incoming on the way. The bastards are running like shit down hill, but somebody's tossing artillery our way to keep us out of their way. I vote we let them run, and dig deep."

There were a lot of cheers for that one. Even the lieutenant breathed a hearty "Amen." Then the net squawked again. "First platoon, don't pull your heads out of your holes for this, but if you can look up, those missiles going by are on their way to the transports. Now we got the bastards between a rock and a hard place. Yeehaa."

"Who is that?" one of Dumont's kids asked.

"That crazy woman who was on net a while back," Cassie answered. "I didn't get no name."

"She's Commander Umboto, brigade XO," the lieutenant answered. "And those big missiles sure do look good going over. Mary, can you catch them on a vid?"

"No sir, not til they come down a bit."

"They sure look pretty."

"Lieutenant, shouldn't you get your head down."

"It is down, Mary. Don't worry about me."

The barrage was light, but steady. Every minute or so another shell would wander their way. Mary kept up a running commentary — on the enemy running and

on the general direction of the next incoming round. Most rounds went right into the gap. Once in a while, one would go long.

"Oh God, I'm hit," came the lieutenant's scream. Mary focused a vid where the lieutenant's hole was. A new and bigger one was right next to it. Rocks, and debris were still falling.

"Lieutenant, you okay?" Cassie called.

No answer.

Mary took her system out of combat situation and into troop status. The lieutenant's suit was still on net, but it glowed a yellow-red. "He's alive, but we're losing him."

"Okay, crew, let's dig him out," Lek sighed on net. On the vid, first one, then three, finally six people were out of their holes, headed for the lieutenant's.

"Mary, you call the incoming artillery," Cassie said. "Try to get a good read on where it'll fall."

"Yeah," Dumont muttered. "I ain't never done somethin' this stupid before. Hate to get killed the first time I try it."

More were out of their holes. Mary doubted they'd do any good. "Six is enough. If we need more, I'll call. Don't need anyone standing around watching others dig."

"You bet nobody's gonna watch me dig," Dumont snarled, but the bite was gone. His usual snap drew a laugh. Mary divided her display, half on those digging, half on the artillery. A gun puffed. Mary used her radar sensors for the first time to plot its fall. "Shell's headed for the crest of the gap. No sweat."

The diggers didn't even pause when the shell exploded. Second shot was no worse. "We've found him," Cassie yelled.

Across the plain, the gun carriage bucked. Mary did the numbers. "Oh shit. You got incoming, and it's gonna be close."

Most of the diggers flattened themselves in the shell crater. Two didn't, huddling together just outside the crater, covering something — someone. Mary forgot to breath as she counted the seconds. "Hail Mary, full of grace," came from one suit. "Our Father, who art in heaven," another. "Sweet Jesus, help the fuck us," was balanced by someone's prayer mantra.

Mary just counted down, "four, three, two, one."

A dust plume sprouted twenty meters from the first crater. Again rocks and shell fragments cut their lazy arcs through the vacuum. Mary could only watch as it showered down.

Dumont yelped. "Goddamn it, somebody pull that hot hunk of metal out of my ass." On vid, one of the two figures that had stayed exposed to cover someone else reached over with a gob of goo and started rubbing it on the others rear.

"Now, does that feel better?" Cassie cooed.

"Yes, mother. You gonna kiss it, make it well?"

"Only in your dreams, kid. Okay, crew. Give me a hand. Lieutenant's still breathing, but he's out cold. Everybody keep goo handy. I don't know how bad his suit's holed."

"Lek," Mary ordered, "bring the bubble." Mine disasters could hole a suit in too many places for goo — too many places to even find. The bubble could keep you alive for an hour. Longer if they found more air. The next three shells stayed out of the way while they cared for their officer.

"How bad is he?" Mary asked on Lek's private line.

"He don't look none too good. There's a lot broken and we got no way to take a peek at him through all this damn armor."

Mary switched to battalion. "Major Henderson. We got a bad hurt lieutenant here. You don't get us help fast, he's dead."

"Nearest set of wheels is yours." The voice wasn't the major's. Commander Umboto was back on the line. "Load the lieutenant on whatever shows up. We'll have an ambulance with a med team meet them ASAP."

"Thank you, ma'am," Mary answered.

"Thank you, sergeant. You put up a damn good fight. The Spartans couldn't have done better. No use losing someone who won the battle just before they get it over with. Umboto out."

Mary put a vid on long distant search. "I think I see a dust cloud coming our way."

"Looks so," Lek agreed.

"Who the Spartans?" Dumont wanted to know. Mary let them talk, but the commander's words had hit her. They had won their battle, but could still die under one of these random shots. It didn't seem fair, to win a battle and get killed before it was over. Miners bitched about owners and their twisted idea of fair. War seem to have no idea of fair. No idea at all.

* * *

"Major Longknife, Senior Pilot Nuu here, and we've got a problem. The *Hardy*, *Noble* and *Gallant* are unfit for space. If the Earthies got more where those came from, we're in a world of hurt. Santiago tells me things aren't going well on your end. I got people who want to lift. What can I do for you?"

"We're in bad shape. Falling back fast as we can. Lighten what ships you got and pile troopers in. Launch them as fast as you fill them."

"How many troopers do we have to load on each ship? You off loaded seven hundred fifty-eight."

"The 2nd got bled plenty. I don't know what we've got now. The gear's not worth the lift, but the troopers are the brigade. Honey, you got to get them back. With them we can rebuild. Without them, we're all dead."

"Ray, you okay?" The voice went soft, no more the transport commander's.

It was the softness that did it, took the lie from his mouth and let the truth out through clinched teeth. "No, friend."

"I could lift the *Friendship*, drop it down close to you."

"Probably on my head, girl. No, we evacuate by the numbers. You fill up a transport, you launch it away from their damn base. We'll make it," he ordered. "Captain Santiago, you out there?"

"Yes sir."

"Turn those carriers around as soon as they get back. Pull drivers from A company. Tell them their ticket out is one trip forward. You having any trouble?"

"Nope. Few hot heads want to go up and show the rest of you how it's done, but I got them taking care of the wounded right now. When are you coming back, sir?"

"On the last carrier."

"I'll be driving it."

"And I'll be waiting for you," Rita whispered.

Major Longknife couldn't turn his head anymore. He didn't have to. The vision of a battle bravely started and badly wrecked was etched behind his eyes, never to go away. For two hours he waited as the remnants of the 2nd Guard streamed past. He should have ordered the artillery silent when it was obvious there was no pursuit, but it slipped his pain wracked mind.

When Santiago loomed over him, he didn't resist the pain spray. The battle was over. He'd lost this one big.

* * *

Trevor Hascomb Crossinshield the ninth stripped naked. He needed to meet the most powerful men on one hundred planets. They were in the sauna; he had exactly five minutes of their time. If he took less, it would be accorded a virtue to him. He could not take more.

Wrapping a towel around himself, he slipped his feet into sandals and padded noisily toward his business appointment. He opened the sauna door only enough to slip in. These men did not suffer cold interruptions. He took the appropriate supplicant's seat on the lowest of the four tiers of cedar shelves, next to the hot stones. When asked, he would ladle water on them for more steam. He would do whatever he was told.

The room was hot. *How can they take the heat?* Not born to this life — or wealth — Trevor doubted he could stand the heat of the highest tier. He would, however, find a place along the middle tiers most comfortable. Searching for the one who had invited him, Trevor risked a quick glance at the upper tier. Steam billowed and drifted there, hiding the men's faces. No, one was a woman. Her towel open, she stretched out languidly along the highest shelf, forcing men to either sit closer together or move to a lower bench. Was she a "companion" on display? The body was sculpted, expensive. Earned or . . .

For a moment, Trevor caught her eyes. There was cold fire there, but nothing for him. He felt like he'd been hacked, the entire contents of his mass storage reviewed and not found worth the effort to format. Trevor snapped his eyes down, locked them on a floor tile and awaited notice. The room was silent; here he would get no dropped scrap of information to sell. *Are my five minutes ticking away?* Desperate, he forced

himself to quiet.

"How goes our little war?" a familiar voice spoke from a corner of the highest tier.

"Your war, Henry, not ours," someone in the opposite corner dared to interrupt. And interrupting, corrected — and challenged. Trevor held his tongue.

"Edward, when all of humanity groans in birth, of course we will be there. We raped her fair and square. The little bastard will fall right into our tender clutches. Of course, it is ours." The voice held a chuckle . . . empty of mirth.

"Thank you, Henry, I love your poetry. But let us not forget, the colony planets are throwing their full weight behind their tin dictator. On several fronts their fleets advance, spewing their songs of 'One Humanity, United together. The only coin the sweat of the worker. The only just pay, what you've made with your own hands.'"

"And I do love your poetry too, Edward, even if it is all second hand. Yes, they do press us here and there, but they are like any new entrepreneur with a penny vision. They over reach, and just moments before they might have realized a profit, they go bankrupt. That is when we step in with a take over bid. There is nothing they plant that we cannot reap."

Trevor risked a glance at his patron. Heat swirled around him. Beneath his words were fire, enough to cut down a dozen CEO's of transplanetary corporations. Still he leaned back against the wall, talking coolly, body frozen in a posture of good cheer. Not even a finger twitched.

"You put much at risk."

"Because you were blind, Edward. People seeped out to the frontier like water under a dam. And you ignored them."

"They paid their bills. Living off the interest made you fat, Henry, and left them nothing."

"Nothing, Edward. One moment you speak of fleets pressing in on us. Another moment you call them nothing. You have ignored the frontier worlds too long. It is time to bring them back into the wide river of humanity, to let them grow wealthy and comfortable like Earth and her seven sisters, like Pitts Hope and the other two score that came after. The colonies must be brought into the family, not by some foot-stamping messiah, but our way. Peacefully, profitably, comfortably. There is no profit in surprises. Left long enough on their own, anyone can dream up a surprise. Edward, we must eliminate surprises."

"And so you play with a war, Henry. Brute force follows no laws, physical or economic. The hounds of war nip at any heel they choose, not just the one you want. You gamble."

"When I gamble, Edward, the fix is already in. Mr. Crossinshield, the fix is in, is it not?"

"Yes, sir." Trevor wasted no time on the gulp he desperately wanted. His button pushed, he spewed his contents in words too rapid to be interrupted. "We have multiple contacts in all major and minor theaters of operations on both the colonial and earth sides. Information is being received, collated and analyzed daily. If President Urm's Unity Movement cannot be properly guided, we have subcontractors in place to canceled him."

The woman rolled over, propped herself on one elbow and crossed her legs. "And there is no one to take his place among the collection of thieves with whom he has surrounded himself." She grinned. There was no humor behind it; no evidence of any feeling at all. "Of course, some of those thieves are our thieves. Very good, Henry."

Trevor's patron opened his lips in an empty smile and went through the motions of a "thank you" before turning back to the man across the room. "You see, Edward, this is a restructuring, not war. A growth of franchises that will be handled delicately. Before the next annual reports are due, we will have closed out our wartime contracts profitably and plunged into the next economic expansion fueled by the unmet needs of the colonies on the credit we extend, to managers we select."

"If you are right. If these puppets are truly yours and if they do not slip their strings and discover a life of their own." the questioner growled. His face twisted in a grimace and he threw up a hand. He knew none of these people of power could hear his words. He had lost.

"I am always right. Thank you, Mr. Crossinshield, it is a pleasure doing business with you. We must talk another time of expanding our relationship."

Trevor stood. "Thank you, sir."

He left. In the cool of the locker room sweat poured off him that had nothing to do with the sauna. When he could, he walked unsteadily to the shower. Under the cooling spray, he regained himself. *The fix is in. We have agents everywhere. We know what is happening.* It was a comforting mantra.

