

Vicky Peterwald – Survivor
By
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Her Imperial Grace, the Grand Duchess, Lieutenant Commander Vicky Peterwald cinched in her five point restraint harness as tight as she could. Beside her, the man sworn to protect her life with his own, Commander Gerrit Schlieffen, did the same. Only then did he began to activate the myriad of controls and systems of the loaned shuttle.

Vicky was careful not to touch anything.

Kris Longknife could probably land the shuttle herself from orbit, while dodging lasers all the way down. Vicky winced; she'd been raised to be traded off for some advantageous marriage by her dad, the Emperor. Here training had consisted mainly of looking pretty while learning needlepoint and the Kama Sutra for both defense and offense.

In the world she'd been raised to expect she would be back in the passenger compartment of the shuttle, seducing her husband into the five hundred mile high club.

Today, Vicky's partner would either dodge the threatened lasers aimed at them, or both of them would die.

And Vicky couldn't do a damn thing about it.

Then again, if they survived the next couple of hours, Vicky just might save a couple of planets in the emperor's crumbling empire from economic collapse, starvation and cannibalism.

Maybe.

If she was lucky and could pull a political miracle out of thin air.

Too bad she had no idea how she might do that.

"You want to turn on the electronic countermeasures suite?" Commander Schlieffen said.

Vicky looked at the collection of gauges, dials and lights in front of her. Most seemed to be a duplicate of those in front of the pilot's seat. There was a light gray panel identified as made by Singer. Vicky pointed at it.

"You mean this?"

"Yep. The admiral wasn't kidding when he said he was giving us his most expendable shuttle. You need to warm up the ECM system if it's going to do us any good in a few minutes."

During her three years in the Imperial Greenfeld Navy, Vicky had learned to stand communication watches on the bridges of battleships. They usually had a couple of specialists standing the ECM watches. As a boot ensign, Vicky had rotated through one watch at the ECM desk.

She hadn't learned much.

However, as limited as her education was, she *could* recognize an on/off button. She pressed it. The lights on the gray board slowly flickered to life.

"That old system isn't worth much," the commander said, glancing from his own board. "Still, if you hold down the update button on the central screen, it may give you a tutorial."

"May?" Vicky said.

"Some versions did. Others were too old and too limited to store that in the system. Give it a try and see what happens."

Vicky held the identified button down. The small central screen on the gray box began to scroll instructions. The Grand Duchess *had* learned to read. Today, what she read told her the system could identify threats that were in its database, prioritize them, and provide a limited amount of distraction.

"I wonder when the database was last updated?" Vicky asked.

"There should be an option in the menu to do that."

Vicky found the option and activated it.

The system went down.

She rebooted the light gray box and went to the update option again.

It went out to lunch again.

The third time, it updated.

"This shuttle isn't in very good shape," she observed dryly.

"As the plane captain told me."

Vicky raised an eyebrow. "This wreck has a plane captain?"

"Actually no," the commander admitted, flipping a switch several times before the data strip above it came to life. "But a second class petty officer was told two hours ago that this wreck was his to captain. It's in as good a shape as it is because he and the best half-dozen sailors he could lay his hands on spent their time getting it fit for a drop. He hopes."

"I can only imagine what it must have looked like four hours ago," Vicky said dryly.

The commander flipped a switch slowly, a half dozen times, frowned and said, "I doubt it."

Vicky was trying to get a report on the number of reloads of chaff the ECM system had. She'd interrogated it three times and gotten three different answers when the commander announced, "you better say any prayers you know. I'm about to activate the anti-matter reactor."

"Now I lay me down to sleep," Vicky muttered.

"Is that the only prayer you know?"

“You may have noticed we don’t do a lot of praying at the Imperial Palace.”

“Then I guess my ‘God help us’ will have to do.”

The commander threw a large double switch between them.

Nothing happened.

A few breathless seconds later, several strip gauges lit up and lights began to dance up and down them.

“Is that good?” Vicky asked.

“You’re still here to ask,” the commander said. “It appears that either I, or my dear mother, still has some pull with the Big Man.”

“I suspect it’s your mother,” Vicky answered.

“No doubt.”

Together, they watched the gauges as their dance settled down to a placid wiggle in the green zones of all six strip gauges.

“I believe we’re ready to drop,” the commander said.

“I do have a meeting to attend with an old friend.”

“Assuming he doesn’t carry through with his threat to have us shot out of *his* sky. Do you affect all your old flames like that?”

“Most. You seem to be a nice exception to the rule.”

“Our relationship hardly has the blush off the rose,” the commander said.

“I hadn’t noticed any blushes on your part.”

“Or yours, Your Grace.”

“Shall we quit stalling and see if this contraption can get away from the station?”

“Why not? I don’t want to live forever.”

So saying, Commander Schlieffen reached above his head for the red bar with **RELEASE** in yellow letters and pulled it.

The shuttle did not depart the station with the grace of a falling angel. Instead the aft tie down released their rear to dangle. The spin of the station pressed them tight against their seats.

The commander yanked again, harder, on the release.

Reluctantly, their forward tie down came loose. They drifted away from High St. Petersburg station with the deck canted down to the right.

“That wasn’t the best launch I ever made,” the commander observed, half to himself. “Nor was it the worse. Now, let’s go see if the Mayor of Sevastopol really intends to kill us.”

Before the Mayor of Sevastopol could have his go at killing them, they had to get away from the station. That proved exciting.

“Damn,” the commander said as the shuttle began to spin. “I’ve got a stuck thruster.”

Vicky was close to graying out before the commander managed to get the thruster off-line.

“Let’s try that again,” he said as he slowly backed them away from the station using long, slow burns from the four thrusters he found he could trust. This time, there were no surprises.

“Who’s tracking us?” he asked as they crossed the ten klick threshold from station control to orbital control.

“I’ve got five search radars on us,” Vicky reported crisply.

“Can that Ouija board tell you which are ground based and might have fire control radars slaved to them?”

“Not a clue.”

“Well, I could hope.”

“I like a man who can hope,” Vicky said.

“I have many admirable qualities,” he muttered, firing the main retro engine. “Some of them don’t even require a bed.”

“I could like the ones that don’t,” Vicky purred.

“Variety from a woman is nice,” he said, eyeing his readouts. “Consistency, however, is very appreciated from rocket engines. Ours, at least for now, appear to be demonstrating a delightful degree of reliability.”

“That can, at the proper time, be quite nice,” Vicky agreed.

Their verbal foreplay abruptly ended as the radio squawked.

“Unidentified shuttle. This is Petersburg Orbital Control. You are not authorized in our space. Return to the station.”

Commander Schlieffen glanced at his comm unit and toggled a switch.

“Petersburg Orbital Control, this is shuttle November, X-ray, three four niner. I have filed a flight plan for a descent to Sevastopol Bay shuttle landing area. I am on descent.”

“Shuttle November, X-ray, three four niner, be advised. Your flight plan was rejected. Return to station.”

Vicky glanced at Gerrit. He pulled a flimsy from his shipsuit pocket. A large header at the top of it identified it as a flight plan. Even larger print, in red letters, read **REJECTED**.

“Orbital Control, this is three four niner. I have an approved flight plan here. I’m on my way down.”

“Three four niner, I have a flight plan for you that was rejected. It shows a time stamp of one hour, fifty-six minutes ago. Cease your burn and return to the station.”

“Sorry, control. Shuttle three four niner is committed to a deorbiting burn. I’ll see you in thirty minutes.”

“Shuttle November X-ray three four niner, be advised that Petersburg reserves control of its space to our sovereignty. I am authorized to use deadly force to protect our sovereign space.”

Gerret glanced at Vicky. She shrugged, as much as her five point restraining harness allowed.

“Orbital Control, I understand your politics. Be advised, I have the Grand Duchess Victory Peterwald on board and I am committed to descent. Again, we’ll see you in thirty minutes.”

A new voice came on the radio. “We know who you have on board and we will see you in hell.”

The transmission ended in a determined click.

“Was that the mayor?” the commander asked.

“I think that was him,” Vicky said. “It’s been a while.”

“Touchy fellow, don’t you think?”

“He was much nicer the last time we met. But then, he wanted an official, Imperial approved city charter. Give a guy what *he* wants and he never calls back for a second date.”

“I’d call you back for a second date,” the commander said, helpfully, hopefully, even a bit consolingly. Vicky wasn’t quite sure which to choose from. Distraction was probably the overriding content of his answer.

The main engine was not firing smoothly.

There were coughs in the flow of reaction mass to the engines. The de-orbital burn was not only uneven, it seemed to pull to the right, then left, then right again with no particular pattern.

The commander concentrated on doing some of that nifty pilot stuff.

Vicky checked her board.

“We got fire control radars scanning us,” she said.

“They locked on?”

“Not yet.”

“So they aren’t serious yet.”

“Apparently.”

“I hope this crazy dance we’re doing is causing them as much trouble as it’s causing me.”

Vicky left the commander to do his piloting thing and eyed her board. The fire control radars were still in scanning mode. In a few minutes, as they began their fiery reentry, radar would become useless.

The problem was surviving until then.

One of the scanning radars locked on.

“They’ve got a lock,” she announced in a low, firm voice. Admiral Krätz would be so proud of his student.

“I’m going to initiate a bit of a turn. When I tell you, release chaff.”

Vicky rested her thumb on the chaff release button. “Ready.”

“Hold it, hold it,” the commander said softly, mostly to himself. “Now.”

Vicky depressed the button firmly once, then let up. The shuttle, responding to the commander’s firm hand, began a shallow pull to the right.

The solid tone of the fire control radar went back to an intermittent beeping as it found itself suddenly with two targets and unable to determine which was its intended.

“Lost you,” the commander chortled.

A moment later, the solid tone was back.

He swung the lander to the left softly. Again the tone broke up, then, a few seconds later, was solid again.

“You weren’t sure where I was there for a second, were you?” the commander said to the distant men intent on tracking them for the kill.

Vicky said nothing.

Twice more the commander did his dodge. Twice more the tone broke briefly, then came back. The second time, he had Vicky release chaff.

Each time, the threatened lasers remained silent.

When firebugs began to flow over the shuttle’s tiny windows, the commander seemed to relax a bit.

“We’re entering the atmosphere. They can’t be sure where we are in all this static. Let’s really make them unsure. I’m going to take us through some wide, gentle S turns to bleed off energy and be unpredictable. You get ready to squirt out some chaff.”

“Ready,” Vicky said.

The gee force was climbing as the atmosphere slowed them, still Vicky kept her finger on the button. As the commander readied to edge his control stick over a fraction he whispered, “Pop chaff.”

Vicky shot another packet of chaff into their fiery slipstream. The bits of aluminum instantly burned away into droplets and fell behind. They showed as one track; the shuttle as another. Vicky could imagine the picture facing the radar operators: two flaming balls. Either one might be a lander.

Meanwhile, the commander slid the actual lander off to the left.

The commander made four more shallow S-turns but didn’t task Vicky with spiking any of the others with burning aluminum.

The threatened lasers held their peace all the while.

“What happens when we clear out of this re-entry phase?” Vicky asked the commander when he seemed less intent on his flying.

“They’ll track us. You’ll use all the chaff we have aboard. There isn’t nearly enough. They either burn us out of their sky or they let you come down and talk to them.”

The commander glanced at Vicky. “I sure hope Your Grace has a nice dog and pony show ready. As much as I find your body delectable and desirable, I don’t think they’ll be much interested in a striptease.”

“I suspect you’re right,” Vicky said.

Too bad she had no idea what she might say to enlist Mannie and his fellow mayors into a program for which she hadn’t the foggiest idea yet of the details.

The threatened lasers never fired. The shuttle landing ground in the middle of Sevastopol Bay was not blocked with shipping. The commander brought the shuttle down in a spray of cooling water.

Then they sat there.

The radio stayed silent. No tug appeared.

“Does this expendable shuttle Admiral von Mittleburg loaned us have any ground mobility options?” Vicky asked.

Commander Schlieffen tapped the main screen and ran it through several menus before answering. “Yes, it appears it does have auxiliary water power.”

It took him a bit of time to activate it, but soon he was steering them toward a shuttle ramp.

“No pier we can dock at?” Vicky asked.

“Nope. We got to go up that ramp.”

“I don’t see any tug waiting,” Vicky noted.

“Hmm, neither do I.”

“Will I have to dive off this thing and swim for shore?” Vicky asked. She was willing, though not looking forward, to starting her plea for cooperation while dripping wet.

“I think we have motors on our landing gear,” the commander said.

“I’ve never seen a shuttle use them.”

Gerrit studied the screen as more instructions scrolled down.

“They haven’t been standard on most shuttles in a while. I did this once back in my academy days. Let’s see if I do better this time,” he said with a grin.

Vicky checked her harness. She couldn’t make it any tighter.

“Could you lower the landing gear?” the commander asked.

Surprise of surprises, the landing gear lowered when Vicky pulled up on the lever between them.

“Do it again,” the commander ordered. “The right main gear hasn’t locked down.”

Vicky recycled the landing gear. On the second try the right main gear locked, but the left didn’t. She recycled the gear four times before all three gear dropped and locked in place together.

“I hope the motors are a bit more reliable,” Gerrit mused.

The nose gear bumped onto the ramp. There was a grinding noise, but the nose began to rise from the water. There was more grinding as the main gear engaged and pushed the lander from the water and up the ramp.

At least, they did for a moment.

“Help me with the wheel. The left main wheel motor has dropped out.”

Vicky grabbed the control wheel that she’d been careful not to touch and helped Gerrit haul the nose wheel off to the right. The yaw to the left damped down but, it was clear the shuttle could not make it all the way up the ramp.

“Engage the brake,” the commander ordered. “Let’s get out of here before this wreck drifts back down the ramp and heads out to sea.”

Vicky popped her harness. Four of the five point restraints broke loose. The one between her legs stayed locked in place.

She hit the release again and nothing happened.

Beside her, the commander was wiggling out of his harness. The top two of his restraint points hadn’t popped. She tried to do some wiggling up, but she really had gotten the harness tight.

The brakes groaned.

Gerrit freed himself and came over to feel around between her legs. On another day, this would have been fun. “Get me out of this and you can feel all you want between my legs tonight,” Vicky offered.

“Promises, promises,” he said, working on the release.

“I’ve kept my promises,” she pointed out.

There was a snap.

“Ouch,” Vicky said. “That pinched me.”

“I’ll kiss it and make it all better later. Let’s get out of here before we have to swim for it.

They exited the forward hatch. There were chocks slung beside the door. Vicky grabbed one, the commander grabbed the other, and they raced for a different one of the main landing gear.

They got the chocks in place about two seconds before the brake gave up the ghost and the lander slid back. Back onto the chocks rather than into the bay.

A pick-up truck drove up, with a tug not far behind. Three men in coveralls got out of the truck. The senior of the three held a life buoy with a long length of rope attached.

He seemed disappointed that he wasn’t going to get a chance to use it.

Tossing the buoy in the back of the truck, he ordered the other two to hitch the lander’s nose to the tug. They did.

The foreman approached Vicky. “We’ll tow the lander to a parking spot on the ramp. You got a credit chit to pay for the tow and ramp rental?”

Vicky was about to open her mouth, but the commander got there first. “Nope. No credit chit that hasn’t been canceled. Guess you’ll have to throw it back.”

“Don’t you think I wouldn’t,” the man grumbled, “but I got my orders to deliver you two to City Hall, so hop in. Maybe while I’m there, I can get someone to impound the lander for lack of payment.”

“I doubt if that wreck is worth enough to pay your charges,” the commander said, and opened the passenger door for Vicky. She settled in the middle slot with the gear shift nearly in her lap.

When the commander settled in beside her, she cuddled up close to him with her legs well away from the gear shift.

The foreman chuckled softly as he got in, started the engine, and reached for the

stick.

It was a very quiet drive to City Hall.

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The man in coveralls deposited them at the curb in front of a new and gleaming glass high rise.

“You been here before?” the commander asked.

“Nope. City Hall was a mite bit smaller last time I visited.”

Many people hurried by them on the street. Many more crossed the gray cobblestoned courtyard as they entered or exited the building.

None so much as glanced at the two Imperial Greenfeld Navy officers in green shipsuits.

With a slight bow, the commander directed Vicky to head inside. He even opened the door for her when they got there.

The ground floor was a marbled foyer full of potted plants and busy people going about their business. None offered to help two Navy officers.

There was an information desk.

No one sat behind it.

No one continued to sit behind it for a full five minutes while Vicky watched it and busy people ignored them.

“Computer,” Vicky finally said. Her computer was made of the same self-organizing material as Kris Longknife’s Nelly. Unlike Nelly, it did not talk back.

It also did not offer suggestions.

“Can you connect to this building’s net?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Do so, please.”

“I am connected to the public portion. There appears to be a much larger private net behind a firewall.”

“Can you get through that firewall?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“Can you locate the office of the mayor of Sevastopol?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Guide us there.”

“You will need to take the bank of elevators that services floors fifteen through thirty.”

No one interfered with them boarding an elevator. They shared it with many busy people. Some got off. Others got on.

None so much as made eye contact with Vicky.

“Their welcoming committee seems very well organized,” Vicky observed dryly.

“Very well organized,” the commander agreed. “One has to wonder if they’ve been practicing for days.”

A young woman, arms full of paper files, almost laughed at that, but she covered her mouth and turned away before Vicky could say anything more.

They got off on the thirtieth floor.

Down the hall, at a corner office, they found an unmarked door that Vicky’s computer insisted was the Mayor’s office.

The commander opened the door.

A young woman studied her computer screen intently. She did not look up.

“Do you have an appointment with the Mayor?” she asked, eyes still on the computer.

“I suspect not,” Vicky admitted.

“The Mayor is a very busy man. He only sees people by appointment,” she said, eyes still only for the screen.

Vicky could have mentioned that Mannie had waited on her the last time they met, but she chose not to argue with the door keeper.

She also did not show any willingness to go away.

The woman finally glanced at Vicky. “I may be able to slip you in later in the day. Please be seated.”

There were plenty of seats in the outer office.

There was no one sitting in them.

Vicky decided that she would not sit in one either.

There were three doors out of the waiting room beside the door she’d come in.

She remembered a story she’d read when very young. It involved a man and two doors. Behind one was a gorgeous woman.

Behind the other was a man-eating tiger.

Today, Vicky faced three door.

Might there be a half-naked hunk behind one of them?

Alas, more likely one only led to the restroom. The other might shield a broom closet. The third led to the mayor.

Vicky studied her three doors. Was the light fooling her or did the carpet leading to one of them show more wear?

She picked her door, praying to any interested God that a lot of people hadn’t beat a pathway to the head.

The commander stepped in front of Vicky and opened the door.

“You can’t go in there,” the secretary said, coming out of her chair.

Vicky had chosen well.