

Rescue on Radion-49

by Tony Cox, 2011

The boy, tall and slender with shaggy sandy hair and a lopsided bloody bandage across his forehead, hesitated at the door of the drab canvas wall tent. A small white sign, hand-lettered HQ with red paint, differentiated that shelter from the hodgepodge of others, many makeshift, that lay shivering among the ancient tombs.

He entered the doorway, glad to be out of the brisk, frigid wind. Inside the tent, the boy paused until his eyes adjusted to the dim light.

A large wall-map dominated the right side; a neat cot and footlocker occupied the left. In the center, a fit clean-shaven middle-aged man sat behind a table littered with papers. Glancing up from reading, the man peered over the top of wire-framed glasses and motioned the youth closer.

“Can I help you, son?”

The boy carefully placed his rifle in a rack near the door and approached the table.

“Major Reynolds, I'm Nat Davis. They told me to report here. I brought fourteen people in from Regalia.”

The major sighed inwardly, reflecting on the boy's youth. He removed his glasses and said gently, “I heard the town had fallen. Can we expect more survivors?”

“No Sir. The rest are gone; only a few well-hidden ones made it.” He touched his bandaged head. “The Rymher thought I was dead, but I was only knocked out. When I came to, I gathered the living and brought--”

The fierce whine of an incoming mortar round interrupted Nat's report. He reacted by dropping and hugging the dirt floor. Through the ground, he felt the explosion, loud and close enough for the blast to leave his ears ringing. Glancing up, Nat realized the major still sat behind the table, papers in hand. Embarrassed, the boy stood and dusted his clothes. “Sorry, Sir. I--”

The major gestured dismissively. “I know something you don't, Nat. This is Rymher sacred ground. We're camped in their cemetery. They'll shoot across the valley to harass us, but they won't drop a shell among these tombs. They won't even enter the valley, unless they're sanctified. That's why we're here. The Rymher army won't assault this valley until they finish a three-day purification ceremony.”

Major Reynolds rubbed his short-cropped head and grimaced.

“Finding respite in the cemetery is the good news. The bad news is we're on the third day now. We can expect the Rymher to hit us at sunrise tomorrow.”

“But sir. They said if we reached here, we'd be evacuated by Confederation--”

“Evacuation was the plan!” Major Reynolds sprang from his chair and started pacing the cramped space within the tent. He punched his finger skyward. “A Confederation battlecruiser is in orbit, ready to help us, but Central Command got cold feet. At the last minute, they ordered the cruiser to stand-down. They don't want to challenge the Rymhers, not without reinforcements.”

Major Reynolds turned to face Nat and said gently, “Find Sergeant Jones. He can use a good man like you, come sunup.”

The boy looked at the major through sad, tired eyes, then he nodded, picked up his rifle, and walked toward the door. At the door, Nat hesitated and turned toward the major.

“Sir, my sister is pregnant, near full term.”

“I'm sorry, Nat,” the major said, shaking his head. “Not much I can do to help.”

A soldier appeared in the doorway, and Nat stepped aside.

The major glanced at the man. “What is it, Bill?”

“Sir, remember me telling you I noticed something odd about the end of that final transmission we received from the cruiser?”

Major Reynolds nodded.

“Well, there was a second message jammed on the end,

bootlegged, not part of the video stream. A short bit of encrypted text: expect package 1900.”

“A package . . . at 1900. What the hell could that be?” The major thought for a moment, shrugged, and said, “Bill, this young man is Nat Davis from Regalia. Would you take him to Sergeant Jones? And tell the sergeant to arrange a night target for the delivery of our package.”

#

Sergeant Jones checked his wristwatch; the numbers glowed faintly in the night.

Almost 1900 hours.

He signaled the soldiers who waited at the four points that delineated the target area. They lit small lamps placed inside black barrels. Deep inside, the dim lights provided a beacon into the dark sky without signaling intention or location to the Rymher army. The men remained in place, ready to extinguish the beacon if necessary.

Soon, the soft, occasional flap of nylon and the light whisper of escaping wind broke the night stillness. Jones spotted a dark shadow blotting out a portion of the star-lit sky. Minutes later, the shadow became a fluttering midnight-black parachute.

Below the chute swung two dark shapes: a person, and below, a cargo crate. Seconds before impact, the parachutist released the dangling box, and then landed beside it. The person crouched and expertly dumped the wind from the nylon canopy to manage the parachute into a pile of limp cloth. Moments later, a discarded helmet and pressure suit were added to the pile, and by the time the sergeant arrived, a young woman dressed in dark green fatigues waited.

“Major?”

“No, I'm Sergeant Jones. The major is waiting at HQ. I can take you to him.”

She gestured to the crate. “We'll need the box, too.”

“My men will deliver that once the target is stowed.”

“Good target, by the way. I spotted the lights as soon as I left the shuttle,” the woman said as they walked along. She paused and turned toward the sergeant. “The non-existent shuttle, for the record.”

“I understand. We appreciate any help we can get.”

They arrived at HQ and went inside.

Sergeant Jones said, “Major, our package is here.”

The woman had already stepped forward with her right hand extended for a handshake. A head shorter than the major, she was a full head and shoulders shorter than the sergeant. Close-cropped dark hair, a trim athletic body, and neatly tailored fatigues gave her a fit, competent look.

“Sir, my name is Katrina. I have a proposition for you.”

Major John Reynolds took her hand. It was a firm handshake.

“Katrina, from the Battlecruiser--”

“No, sir, Katrina, from nowhere. We both know the Confederation refused to help you. Any money in your pocket?”

“What?”

“Paper, metal. Anything will do.”

The major dug into his pocket and removed a small silver coin. Katrina took it from him.

“Thank you, sir. I used to be Captain Katrina of the Confederation Special Forces, but that ended tonight at 1700. Now, I'm just Katrina, and I'm a mercenary. With this coin, you purchased my services. I'm going to get you out of here.”

The major and the sergeant exchanged astonished glances.

The latter turned and said, “Katrina--I remember hearing of a Lieutenant Katrina at Klignor...”

Nodding, the woman replied, “I was there. My team did the forward reconnaissance for the invasion.”

“Well, your reconnaissance sure saved our butts!” exclaimed Sergeant Jones. “Without it, our whole company would have dropped into the Rymher ambush.”

“A lot of brave soldiers died that day. I lost half my team.”

Major Reynolds shook his head. “The Rymher are so cold and ruthless now, it's hard to believe they were once part of the Confederation.”

Katrina nodded. “They're human, sir; just like us.”

The three war veterans paused several seconds and reflected on lost comrades and times past.

Katrina broke the silence. “People count is still less than 500. Right, sir?”

“Captain, if you're going to be just Katrina, call me John. Not major. Not sir,” John Reynolds, the major, responded. “And yes, they stopped trickling in this afternoon. I counted 471 in all.”

Katrina shook her head sadly. “471 left of the original 1000 settlers? What a tragedy.”

An anguished John replied, “We honestly didn't realize Radion-49 was a Rymher planet. We thought we'd found an unpopulated earth-like world on the edge of Confederation space.”

“Still, it shouldn't end this way,” Katrina said grimly.

“They say we have defiled their sacred land. Only our blood can atone for our blasphemy.”

“They'll get no more innocent blood on my watch,” asserted Katrina. “I need transport pilots, Z-130 qualified. I've been told they're here. I want at least five, but ten would be better--full redundancy, in case we lose a few in the op.”

The major turned to Sergeant Jones. “Jim, Mary, Janet, Richard, Luke--”

“Bill, Mike, Kathy, you and I,” finished Jones, counting on his fingers.

“I'm qualified, too. That makes eleven,” responded Katrina. “Good. Get them and we'll do a briefing.”

She glanced outside through the open doorway where the Sergeant's men had deposited the cargo crate. The woman gazed back at the two soldiers and pointedly tapped her wristwatch,

“Sunrise happens in less than nine hours.”

The major made his decision and nodded to Sergeant Jones, who left immediately.

“John, would you help me with the box.”

They pulled the crate inside where Katrina busied herself unpacking equipment. By the time she'd finished, the sergeant was back with the pilots.

They crowded around the major who said, “Meet Katrina. Seems like we've hired her to get us off this rock.”

This caused a stir and some muttering. The major held up his hand to signal silence. “Katrina has a plan, which is more than we can say for ourselves. Let's hear her out.”

“The major is right. I have a plan. Not a great plan, but if it's successful, we'll survive what's coming at dawn.”

The group settled down to listen.

“To escape, we need transports. We don't have any. But the Rymher do.” Katrina walked over to the major's wall map. “Z-130s, each capable of transporting 100 settlers.” She pointed to the map. “In this location--7 kilometers from here.”

Sergeant Jones objected, “At least four thousand well-armed Rymher troops are between us and those transports.”

More angry muttering from the group of pilots.

Katrina glanced at the sergeant, then back at the map. “We're located here.” Tapping with her finger. “Next to this river, and the transports are here.” She tapped again. “Next to the same river. There are no troops in the river.”

“This is the middle of winter. That river water is icy cold. We wouldn't last fifteen minutes.” An angry voice from back of the group.

“Very true,” responded Katrina as she crouched beside her cargo box and pulled out a black rubbery garment. “This is survival gear, a wet suit usable down to minus 10 degrees. The box contains twelve of these with accompanying flotation collars to help prevent drowning in turbulence.”

She paused and looked up at the pilots. “Shouldn't be much

turbulence. The river is wide and deep, a swift current, but it has no sharp bends, rapids, or major obstructions to worry about. With the suits to keep us alive, we can drift downstream to the air strip.”

Dropping the wet suit, Katrina returned to the group. “In addition, a rope will link us all together so no one will get misplaced in the darkness.”

“Once we’re at the landing strip, I’ll go first to scout and to take out any guards I find. Confederation surveillance spotted three around the strip earlier this evening. I don’t expect more than that; the rest of the Rymher troops on this side of the river should be involved in the purification ritual.”

“We’ll grab five transports and disable the rest. That’ll buy us a couple of hours before the Rymher can fly in replacements.”

Katrina turned to the major. “The cleared area where I landed will be our airstrip. It’s a bit rough and too damn short, but we’ll make it work. The settlers should be organized in five groups, one for each Z-130, injured, children, and women first, of course, able-bodied men and soldiers last, because they’ll be needed to help load the first couple of ’130s. We’ll rig the bays with heavy cargo nets secured to the deck. Once on board the people should lay as flat possible and grab as much net and each other as they can.”

She continued, looking at the pilots, “The transports will come in hot with the rear cargo door open and take off hotter yet, closing the door on the way up. Expect plenty of air turbulence and possibly some sharp maneuvering. Like I said, we’ll only have a couple of hours at most before the Rymher get wise and do something, so we’ll stage the touchdowns twenty minutes apart.” Looking again at the major, “To do that, your people must be organized and they must be fast.”

Katrina stepped back so she could see the whole group. “Any questions?”

From the back, a man asked, “Once we’re loaded, where are we going.”

“Good question.” Katrina thrust her finger into the air. “Up. Get into near-space and you'll find plenty of help. Because of politics, the Confederation cruiser isn't allowed to land an evacuation party, but they'll sure as hell pick up any refugees they find in space.”

“Any more questions?”

The group was quiet. Kristina asked, “Anyone with a better idea?”

Again, silence.

“No? Okay,” said Katrina, “pick out a wet suit, say your goodbyes, get ready, and I'll meet you at the river in fifteen.”

As the group of pilots filed out, Katrina glanced at the major. “Are you getting your money's worth, John?”

The major just shook his head. “Can we do this?”

“I've been in worse situations,” Katrina said calmly. “Sir, the way I see it, you'll be needed here to oversee the loading, that's the most important, and the weakest, part of this scheme. Get your people loaded on time, and you and I will take the last Z-130 up.”

#

Clad in a wet suit, Katrina paced the water's edge staring at the dark, roiling river, her mind on the long ago raging river of her childhood and her childhood fear that still lingered albeit faintly. Presently, she noticed she had company. The pilots had assembled around a dim lantern and waited for her orders.

“Okay, we've enough pilots for two per plane, so pair up. Who wants to be my partner?”

Amid the group, now shuffling to pair up, one man stepped forward, “I guess that'll be me. My name is Richard.”

Katrina quickly appraised Richard; short and muscular, he sported a close-cropped full beard. She nodded and said, “Richard, our transport will be the rear guard and the last to land.”

Picking up the end of the rope, Katrina tied a loop and attached it to a carabiner on her belt. She measured several meters, tied another loop, and offered it to the nearest pilot. Katrina repeated the actions until she had all the pilots attached securely to the rope.

“We'll stay in the shallows on this side until everyone is in the water. Then we'll swim for the other side to avoid the main Rymher camp. Once we clear their camp, we'll make our way back to this side and land near the airstrip. Upstream from the strip, there's a control tower with an antenna. We'll use the tower for our target, but we'll drift past it to land beside the airstrip. Everyone ready?”

Katrina swung a small waterproof pack onto her back, glanced at the waiting line of pilots, glanced at the dark water, and grimly said, “Right.”

She resolutely waded into the river. Almost immediately, the current began tugging at her, threatening to tumble her. Katrina resisted until every one was in the water. She called, “Let's go!” and started swimming across the swift river, drifting as she swam.

The rope attaching the swimmers was a serious, but necessary, impediment. Maintaining a semblance of order became a futile struggle. One swimmer and then another was in the lead as different currents sucked the group along. The first ducking in the cold, icy water was a sudden shock that each one experienced, but the wet suits prevailed.

Then it was over. Katrina regained the lead and guided the tethered pilots to a muddy landing downstream of the control tower.

Katrina crouched in the scant shelter of the river bank and checked her pack. In a low voice she called, “Sergeant Jones.”

A shadow extracted himself from the others and crouched beside her. Katrina took a quick, careful look over the bank.

“How many Z-130s do you count?” Katrina whispered, indicating the airstrip with a nod.

Jones peered over the bank for a few moments, then ducked

back down. "I count five."

"Damn, that's what I counted. There's supposed to be seven."

"We may have two in the air to worry about," she added.

Jones nodded.

"Okay, here's how it goes down. We can't allow the guards to alert the main Rymher camp, so you guys will wait here until I take out the guards and whatever communications they have going. I have a quiet chemical bomb to blow the radio equipment. When that is done, I'll signal with this." Katrina tapped his arm with a small flashlight. "It has a red beam and I'll make the signal from the right side of the control tower, one long flash followed by two short ones."

"I'll pilot the Z-130 closest the control tower. Assign pilots to the other transports and Richard to mine. You take the nearest transport and lead out after I'm in the air. The others will follow you while I provide the cover. Stay off the radio. Go directly across the river. Make a wide loop to allow the others to line up behind you, spaced out, so we can make the twenty minute touchdown schedule that we promised the major. Oh, and be sure to rig the cargo nets before you take off. You may not have time later. Do you have a knife?"

"Yes," the sergeant responded.

"Good." Katrina rummaged around in her pack and pulled out two sets of infrared night-vision goggles. She handed one set to Jones, "You can watch me in action. If I fail, it'll be your turn."

Katrina donned the other set of goggles. She peered over the river bank and after a few minutes said, "I see three guards. Two together near the building and one at the far corner of the runway."

She ducked back down, and Jones rose to take a careful look.

"That's how I call it, too."

Katrina closed the pack, pulled it onto her shoulders, and adjusted the straps. She climbed the river bank.

“Katrina,” Sergeant Jones called in quiet voice.

The woman stopped and turned.

“Good hunting.”

She waved and disappeared into the night heading downstream.

#

Through the goggles, Jones watched Katrina make her way along the river bank. Then the woman cut through the brush that bordered the end of the runway. The sergeant's night-vision goggles displayed infrared light with a green monochrome view. Katrina was a hot, bright blob-like shape moving through foreground shadows created by cooler vegetation of varying shapes and sizes and silhouetted against the colder, darker background of distant trees and sky. Her target displayed in the goggles as another bright-green blob at the far corner of the airstrip.

The sergeant whistled softly in admiration as the bright blob of Katrina merged with the bright blob of the guard and immediately separated to continue her journey up the opposite side of the air strip. There was no hesitation, no struggle, just a quick, efficient transaction that left behind a dimming green blob, puddled and still.

While Katrina moved among the distant shadows toward the control tower, Sergeant Jones briefed his team and assigned pairs of pilots to specific aircraft. The team arrayed themselves along the river to await the signal.

With the team in place and ready, Jones crouched with night-vision goggles again at the top of the river bank to watch Katrina and wait for her signal. The two guards at the control tower had separated, one at each corner of the building. Katrina approached from the far side of the landing strip, her bright blob flickering as she moved cautiously through the brush.

Near the building now, she disappeared from view only to reappear next to one of the guards.

Two bright blobs merged in what appeared a furious struggle. The second guard rushed over to join the action. One blob puddled and lay still. Soon, a second followed. The third bright blob stood motionless for a moment over the two prone figures, then moved away toward the building.

Sergeant Jones realized he'd been holding his breath. He slowly released it and quickly drew in another. Had Katrina won the struggle? He thought so, but he wasn't sure. The fight had been too intense and too violent. In the dark and at the distance, the individual bright blobs were hard to keep track of.

Jones glanced at his watch. *I'll wait five minutes. No signal by then--it's my turn.* He continued to watch the building.

Suddenly, the building windows flashed a brilliant light that flooded his vision and overloaded the goggles. Jones jerked them off.

Almost immediately, the brilliance disappeared and soon afterward he saw a red flash of light beside the tower, then two quick red flickers.

With a short whistle, the sergeant alerted the others, and the team climbed over the bank and rushed the Z-130 transports. Each pair gained entry through the small side door in the middle of the craft just aft of the left wing. One soldier hurried forward to secure the cockpit while the other checked the back. After they'd insured the plane was empty, they busied themselves rigging a net to the floor of the cargo bay.

Katrina had already secured the first transport and was rigging the net when her copilot arrived.

“Yo, Richard,” Katrina called busily, “give me a hand with this.”

The two unreeled the heavy netting, pulled it across the floor of the cargo bay, and secured it to deck-hooks on the far side. When securely attached, the net was tightened by reeling in the excess. As Richard tightened and locked the last reel, Katrina stood and said, “Okay, now we get this bird into the air.”

She paused to pick up a heavy rifle leaning against the

bulkhead. “I borrowed this from one of the Rymher guards. It's a light machine gun and may come in handy at the cemetery. Grab that bag of extra clips.”

The pair climbed the short flight of stairs to the cockpit, where Katrina, sitting in the pilot's seat, started an abbreviated flight check.

“We have enough fuel!” Katrina crowed.

She turned to Richard and shouted above the whine of the starting engines, “I wasn't positive of that. I used Confederation surveillance data on their flight paths to calculate how much fuel they'd used, but I wasn't sure they'd started with topped-off tanks.”

Shocked, Richard wordlessly looked at her.

Katrina looked back and laughed. “Hey, these are desperate times.”

He noticed a bleeding cut on her cheek and a large darkening bruise that spread along her jaw to her right eye. “Are you okay?”

The woman brushed her cheek with the back of her hand, touched blood and winced. “Hazards of the job, I guess.”

She reached overhead to a bank of switches and flipped several. “Buckle up, it's time to get this show on the road--oh, and keep an eye on the radar. We have two transports unaccounted for.”

“As soon as we're in the air and you have time, secure that rifle for me. Don't want it rattling around in the cockpit.”

Her hand now on the throttle, she eased it forward and released the brakes. “Lets do it.”

Seconds later, they were airborne and circling the landing strip.

Sergeant Jones was the next to lift into air. Aloft, he immediately banked and crossed the river. The other three transports followed.

Katrina and Richard waited until the fourth ZED-130 had crossed the river before taking their place as rear guard.

Kilometers across the river, led by Sergeant Jones, the convoy flew in the low wide loop that would allow them to stage the landings in the refugee camp. Their air speed was slow; they were using the lift fans to stay aloft.

A thousand meters above the convoy, Katrina and Richard circled, guarding the convoy against intruders. The first transport had just broken away to make its landing run when Richard reached over and tapped Katrina's shoulder. As she glanced his way, he pointed to the radar screen. The screen displayed a pair of flashing blips. Identified by the on-board computer as Z-130s, the two transports were heading directly toward the convoy. Katrina nodded and immediately banked to intercept.

The first Rymher aircraft was an easy prey. Once they were in range, Katrina popped a couple of 40 millimeter shells into its fuel tanks and climbed sharply to fly over the explosion.

She immediately banked to the right. Her intent was to approach the other transport from the side; however, the Rymher pilot anticipated this maneuver and turned to follow Katrina. Soon, he was close behind her and approaching cannon range. Katrina climbed three thousand meters and banked sharply to the left and then to the right, but was unable to shake the enemy aircraft. It was still on her tail and closing fast.

Suddenly, under full power, Katrina pulled the stick all the way back to abruptly climb again, standing the craft on its tail and dumping the lift provided by the wing airfoils. She transferred all the power from the engines into the vertical thrust mode. With both the forward power and airlift gone, the plane quickly lost its forward momentum and plummeted downward, tail first.

The Rymher pilot, unable or unwilling to follow Katrina's extreme flight path, panicked and continued straight ahead. As he did so, he flew through Katrin's curtain of explosive projectiles. Shortly afterward, the Rymher aircraft caught fire and fell from the sky.

When the g-force, heavy in the climb, suddenly went

negative, Richard involuntarily screamed. The combined thrust of the engines and the lift fans pushed the plane over backward and belly up.

Katrina fought for control of the upside down aircraft which was still falling toward the planet. She throttled back the starboard engines to unbalance the negative lift caused by the vertical thrust and the lift fans. After the force differential righted the plane, she equalized the lift, went to full throttle on all engines, and feathered the controls to slowly change the thrust from vertical back to forward motion.

For countless seconds, the falling aircraft paused, vibrating violently in the air. After a tremendous shudder that coursed from tail to nose, the plane reversed its downward plunge and started climbing again. The force of the sudden change shoved Katrina and Richard hard against their seats.

Richard swallowed hard. “What the hell was that?”

Katrina laughed nervously. “We're alive, aren't we?”

She was silent for a few seconds and laughed again.

“I've always wondered whether these clunky dudes could fly upside down!”

Catching up with the convoy, Katrina eased the engines back from full power and flew a slow wide circle while Richard monitored the radar display for more Rymher aircraft.

#

In the pre-dawn half-light, the major looked with anxious satisfaction down the rows of settlers, divided in five orderly groups. They were ready, barring the unexpected, a panic, or a stampede, and he hoped he had enough soldiers in place to circumvent that. John shrugged; he was as ready as he could be.

“Sir!” The sandy-haired boy with the lopsided bandage interrupted John's muse. The major turned toward the voice.

“What is it, Nat?”

“Sir,” said Nat. “It's my sister. Her water broke”

John was silent.

“Sir?”

“I heard you Nat. Did it just happen?”

“Yes sir,” responded Nat, the sound of his voice almost lost in the roar of the first transport, now landing.

“Nat, find some help and carry your sister to the front of the transport cargo bay. I'll meet you there.”

The boy left, and the major hurried to the first group of settlers. The major's men were helping the injured, the children, and their mothers board the waiting aircraft.

Once the process had started and was moving well, John jogged to the front to help Nat with his sister. Fortunately, the dim interior light in the cargo bay made finding them easier. Nat and another young man carried the moaning pregnant woman between them. They hurriedly, but carefully, picked their way forward through the loaded humanity. John rushed past them to stand beside two large horizontal cylinders.

“Nat!” he called and motioned them over to where he waited.

When Nat was beside him, the major leaned closer so Nat could hear his words above the noise inside the aircraft. “Nat, do you know what these are?”

Nat looked at the cylinders, understanding now, “Yes sir, they're escape pods for the pilots. All the transports have them.”

“That's right. And you know they're equipped with temporal-stasis field generators that can slow time to almost nil. With your sister in one of these, wrapped in a t-s field, she and her unborn baby can make it to the battlecruiser even if we take days to get there.”

He opened the pod, helped Nat and the other man place the distraught woman inside and calm her. After the lid was closed, John energized the t-s field.

The major turned to the two youths and said, “Come on, boys. We have four more transports to load.”

The trio hopped off the tail ramp of the already moving first transport just in time to watch the approach of the second

transport.

With every remaining settler aware of the importance of orderly quickness and having just watched the boarding process, the loading of the second transport was quick. Despite the quickness, number three landed as number two became airborne. Four followed three.

“Let's load this one heavy,” called the Major to Nat and his other helpers, yelling to make his voice heard above the roar of the aircraft. “We're running out of time and darkness. I want the last load to be light and fast” He replaced the rag over his mouth and nose in an attempt to avoid sucking in the airborne dust and grit.

The turbulence created by thrust fans during the landings and takeoffs blew up a thick dust fog. The fog settled slowly, each successive transport added its share, and by the time the fourth transport landed, a dust cloud enveloped the entire cemetery.

“This dust is good news,” John had told his crew earlier when someone complained. “The Rymher know what we're doing by now, but with this dust they can't get a clear shot at us or the transports.

#

Unseen by the major, Katrina and Richard had already engaged the Rymher troops, making repeated passes while spraying those brave enough to advance toward the graveyard with rounds from the Gatling gun at the nose of the transport. Suddenly, the gun was out of ammunition and the nighttime shadows were fading before the approaching dawn.

“Okay, time to land, pick up our cargo, and get off this rock,” Katrina said while she pulled the aircraft up and away from the Rymher army, circling to put it on the proper flight path for landing in the dust-obscured cemetery.

Richard nodded agreement. He'd been listening to the occasional zing of rifle shot ripping its way through the

fuselage.

Katrina tapped his shoulder, “Richard, you take the controls for the landing. I think I'll get that rifle and be waiting on the ramp as we land.”

“Vital hits on a moving target are harder, so don't stop, not even for an instant. Make these last guys run for a ride, and don't stay on the ground too long,” she shouted over her shoulder.

As soon as Richard saw the fourth transport rise from the dust, he dropped down for the landing, steering between the hazy landing lights. As the transport dropped, the warning for an open cargo door commenced flashing. Katrina was positioning the ramp for landing.

They'd barely touched down when the major and Nat appeared out of the dust fog. Both carried weapons. John waved at Katrina and he and Nat turned to cover the final loading. The settlers and soldiers materialized out of the swirling dust five abreast on both sides, frantically running and jumping and rolling onto the ramp. Wave after wave they came, leaping on as soon as there was a space on the ramp. Katrina, from the end of the ramp fired above their heads in the direction of the Rymher troops.

“Left side, all loaded,” came a cry from the left. This was followed by a similar shout from the right. John and Nat, running now, dropped their rifles, threw their arms in the air, and eager hands pulled them on board. Immediately there was a chorus from inside the cargo bay, “Go, Go. Get us out of here.”

Richard grinned and eased the throttle forward.

Still providing cover fire, Katrina slowly backed up the ramp toward the cover of the transport.

Suddenly, a wild Rymher shell struck her rifle, knocking it from her hands. The shell fragmented and continued up her right arm, shredding it to just above the elbow. The impact sent the woman and the rifle flying in separate arcs off the ramp. Katrina landed hard on her back, breathless and limp in the dust. Blood squirted from her brachial artery.

“Nat!” yelled the major as he jumped from the ramp. He gathered the limp woman in his arms and ran after the departing plane. Catching up with the transport, John tossed Katrina on the end of the ramp where Nat was waiting. Nat grabbed his hand and pulled him aboard just before the plane became airborne. On the ramp, in the backdraft created by the speeding aircraft, the blood spurting from Katrina's artery turned into a wild spray.

With great effort, the panting major pulled himself to his feet and unsteadily picked up the limp Katrina again, “Nat! Help me get her to the escape pod before she bleeds out.”

With Nat leading the way, the pair scrambled over the human cargo, heedless of who they stepped on. They dumped Katrina in the empty pod, slammed the lid and energized the t-s field. Only then did they relax, slumping to sit beside the pod, overexerted and out of breath.

Some time later, the major stirred, slapped the top of Nat's thigh, and said, “You're a good man, Nat.”

“Thank you sir,” responded Nat.

John wearily flexed his legs and stood. He climbed the short set of stairs to the cockpit.

At the sound behind him, Richard turned his head. “Sir, is she going to make it?”

“I just don't know, Richard. She was still spurting arterial blood when we closed the pod.”

The major thought for a moment.

“Katrina's tough. I'd give her a fighting chance, depending on her other injuries.”

“She saved us all, sir. Without her, we'd still be down there.”

“I know, Richard, I know.”

After a moment of silence, John asked, “What's our status.”

“Two transports are already in near space, sir, waiting for a rendezvous with the Confederation Battlecruiser. Two more are right behind. The Confederation has already given us political asylum. The Rymhers aren't liking it, but they're not attacking

us either, at least not yet.

“Ours is the only transport with problems. It's the small arms fire we suffered before taking off. We're losing pressure as we climb. We'd be losing more if most of the bullet-holes hadn't self-sealed. I think the Rymher technology is ahead of us on that. But we'll have to patch several large holes in the back before we can lift to space.”

“Okay, Richard. Hold to a steady climb and I'll see what I can do about those holes.”

#

The spattered blood on Major John Reynold's fatigues had dried completely by the time he was pacing back and forth in the sick bay waiting room. He'd found lodging for the settlers and his soldiers in the crew quarters of the battlecruiser. Nat was the proud uncle of a baby girl, already named Katrina. The major waited the outcome of surgery on the little girl's namesake.

A man in dress whites emerged from a hallway and approached the major. He stopped in front of John with his hand extended, “I'm Admiral Koonday.”

The major shook his hand then stepped away and saluted. “Sir, I want to thank you for rescuing us.”

With a wave of his hand, the Admiral dismissed John's thank you and said, “Major, my superiors wouldn't allow me to evacuate you or your settlers. Fortunately, you were able to employ mercenaries to get you off Radion-49 and into space where you could request political asylum from us. I'm glad you found those mercenaries and made it up from the planet.”

John nodded silently.

The admiral continued. "I'm here to personally thank you for saving the life of a dear friend who only recently left the service. Thank you for helping our Katrina and bringing her up with--”

“Sir, after what she did for us, there was no way we'd have

left her behind. You've heard then? She *is* going to make it?"

The admiral nodded. "It was damn close, major, she's lost the arm and a lot of blood--that trick with the escape pod saved her life. Yes, Katrina will make it. It will take time, but she's tough and strong-willed. They tell me there's enough left of her arm to rejuvenate. A few weeks here to recover, six months at a rejuv clinic, and she'll be back in business."

#

Katrina leaned back and gingerly twisted her neck to look up at the sickbay orderly. "I can walk, you know. You don't need to push me in a chair."

The orderly, a tall, lanky non-com, laughed. "Listen lady, my orders are to deliver you to the shuttle--and to make sure you stay in this wheelchair."

Katrina started a shrug, but quickly decided that wasn't a good idea. Bound tightly to her upper torso, a bulky sleeve encased and protected the remains of her right arm. Meds dulled the hard pain, but certain movements still involved unpleasant twinges.

Oh well, she mused, might as well enjoy the ride. From wheelchair to the shuttle to rendezvous with another, larger shuttle. Then on to the planet Voorox and the rejuvenation clinic where they'll grow me a new right arm. Using only my left hand is such a bummer!

Last night was fun, she continued, as the orderly rolled her down the corridor, but sad. It was hard, saying goodbye to my old comrades.

Last night, her sickbay room became an open house. Admiral Koonday and the rest of her friends aboard the battlecruiser came by to reminisce old times and to wish her well.

And saying goodbye to new comrades, too. Major Reynolds and Sergeant Jones had stopped by earlier with a communique from the president of the colonization company. It authorized a

huge fee, plus medical expenses.

And Nat, with his little niece.

Katrina laughed.

"What?" asked the startled orderly.

"My first job as a mercenary and they're already naming kids after me!"