

PRESUMED DEAD

Days later, while sheltering under mushroom trees from rain that had lost its novelty and just before dead Roscoe strolled by with black bubbled blood down one side of his head, she decided the end had begun when George McClusky had said, “So what do you suppose that is?”

That had been the moment. Everything leading up to it may have had a bearing, may have been a primer, but hadn't been the trigger. Not the utter mental void of floating in space with only the whisper of her rebreather for company. Not when the *McMurdo Sound* disintegrated around her. Not even the battle itself.

Cy slumped against the mushroom big as a tree trunk and closed her eyes to let another dizzy spell pass. The ghost of Jos Manxman would be appearing soon. She knew it. But right now she couldn't stomach facing the spectre again, arguing with it again.

Round about her the rain continued to fall as it'd fallen for days without number, or so it had seemed.

She could barely remember the battle. It'd been too brief and too like several other recent fire-fights in its distant, impersonal violence. If she thought of them at all she found they were gradually merging into a single indefinite moment of heightened awareness.

What she did recall sharp and clear, despite reoccurring delirium, sickness and ghosts, was the half hour before those three enemy vessels showed up where they shouldn't have been. In particular Cy remembered Lieutenant Jalta, goblin-grinning Masaki Jalta, gunnery officer of the Terran cruiser *McMurdo Sound*, and how she'd waited for him while eating meat for the first time in her life.

Dark-haired, with a small nose, thin lips, and faint traces of past acne, Cy De Gerch, a short and spare girl rather muscular about the shoulders, had sat by herself at a table in the cruiser's mess deck, pondering the grey chunks among her beans and rice. *Could it really be meat?* They chewed leathery and tasted odd. Nice, in fact delicious ... but odd. She moved them around the bowl with her splade. *Bet it is meat. How decadent.* She chewed another morsel. *God! It is! It is!* Staring off at a bulkhead as her taste buds blissed, she wondered if she were supposed to feel guilty. Or at least ill.

“Ah! My sister-in-arms, I presume!”

Cy glanced around, just in time to see a young man drop into the seat beside her -- and as quickly jumped up again.

“Sorry,” he said. “Didn’t see you were eating. I’ll come back later.”

“Mh oo oo,” she said with her mouth full and motioned him to sit again. Fair-haired and round faced, about twenty-two, twenty-three, she guessed. His green tunic and slacks -- denoting the ordnance section of the Terran Star Corps -- matched his green eyes and goblin grin. She swallowed and said, “Lieutenant Jalta?”

“My fame runs ahead of me.”

“Your fame runs onto my secondment docs. I am Lieutenant De Gerch, Martian Star Corps, temporarily re-assigned from frigate *Utopia Plain*.”

“I’ve never met a Martian before.”

“Well, now you have. What were you expecting? A naïve colonial? A rough-cut outlander with red sand in her boots? Someone with two heads?”

He grinned again, her only answer.

“I’ve been instructed,” Cy went on, “to ‘confer with the weapons officer *McMurdo Sound* at the earliest opportunity after embarking re fire control familiarization and compatibility evaluation.’ I embarked two hours ago, and now we’re almost at our war

games area. Your Exec -- I haven't met your commanding officer yet; he was occupied ... Captain Bokka?"

"Yes."

"Your Exec told me you were occupied as well, so I took the liberty of familiarizing myself with your fire control system on my own."

"My apologies for being late -- problems with some of the drones on the hangar deck. They were used in action yesterday and some of them got banged about."

Cy nodded. "All the same, Mr Jalta, you're cutting it fine. We spin out of subspace in about twenty minutes. We go to Emergence General Quarters in fifteen."

"It's times like these I wish I were more than one person."

Cy looked at him a moment and smiled. "Yeah, ditto. In my ship I'm also astrolocator and Exec."

"Chief cook and bottle washer, eh?"

"Something like that."

"I guess there's no such thing as a specialist in a frigate. Who's taking your place while you're with us?"

"No one. I'm irreplaceable." She winked.

His grin reappeared, then downsized to a smile. He said, "So ... you're a Gartino?"

"The latest thing in modern space warfare, yes. The reason we're out here and about to play games with *Moreton Bay*." With her splade she speared a grey lump from her dish and waved it at eye level. "This *is* meat, isn't it?"

"Mars," he said with a chuckle. "Yes. It's beef."

"Beef?"

"Dead cow."

"Cow?"

“Mars,” he said again. “My docs tell me you’re Lieutenant *C.J. De Gerch*?”

“Cyleen Jessica. Cy if you’d rather.”

“I’d rather. Masaki. Though I’m commonly known aboard *McMurdo Sound* as Guns.”

“Guns?”

“Old naval expression. Gunnery officer. Back when they used gunpowder cannon.”

He paused. “Cannon?”

“I know what cannon are. I’ve psychosimulated sea battles like Trafalgar and Leyte Gulf. I played Jutland three times.”

“Jutland! How did you fare?”

“Gunnery Officer of battlecruiser *Seydlitz*: Sunk. Captain of battlecruiser *Lion*: Sunk. Captain of torpedo-boat *V 28*: Sunk ... after ramming battleship *Iron Duke* in a glorious night action.”

“Formidable! We must have a talk about it before your own ship grabs you back. I’ve only played Jutland once myself. Too busy playing the real thing out here.”

“Yes.” She nodded and in a flat tone reeled off recent battles won and lost:

“Procyon, Bellatrix, The Cue Ball ‘Ballet’, The Orion Rift --“

“You were at The Orion Rift?” he asked, for once without banter. “I *thought* I recognized the name *Utopia Plain*.”

“Yes. She was there with three other Martian frigates, all with Gartinis on the trigger. We held the Xenoid flanking attempt until you Terrans could regroup: three big Gloop cruisers that by rights should’ve scorched us out of existence. But we held ‘em because that was what we were born to do.” She lifted another splade of meat, rice and beans. “You know, Guns, I could see myself becoming an eater of meat -- what’s the word for that?”

“Carnivore.”

“Good word,” she said, noticing how he watched with quiet amusement her splading small portions, how she carefully sipped from her tumbler as if she would sooner spill her own blood than spill a drop of water.

“Got your gear stowed?” he said.

“What I brought with me from *Utopia Plain* and what I was issued by your store. Got a spare bunk above the short range sensors right forward.”

“Ah! The guest room. What do you think of *McMurdo Sound*?”

“She’s a big ship.” Cy paused a moment, then said, “I appreciate that Earth needs these monsters for the wider role you play in interstellar affairs than do we mere Martians.” She shrugged. “Still ...”

“Go on.”

“Well, sitting at gunnery just now made me feel I was wearing something one size too big.”

The Earthman chortled. “Anything else?”

“I’m not sure I can integrate fully with your weapons systems. Unlike Martian systems, yours doesn’t have the semi-neural paths for direct interface with holistic software.”

“By holistic software you mean yourself.”

“Yes.” She took another mouthful of meat and beans. “This really is delicious, you know.”

As he watched her wash it down with measured sips of water he said, “Would you like something else to drink? I don’t know about Martian ships, but we operate a wet mess.”

She smiled. “And have your captain charged with allowing under-aged drinking? I’m only seventeen, you know.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He paused awkwardly. “It’s just that ...” He trailed off, making vague gestures.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re not the first to be disconcerted by my age, and you won’t be the last. The Gartino Experiment prides itself in cramming a lot into a little time. At any rate I don’t drink. Not any more. When I passed my intermediate astrogation course last year I celebrated too hard with a friend of mine.” Cy shook her head sadly. “Whisky sours. Never again ... never again.”

Masaki Jalta’s grin returned.

Cy said, “I’ve jury-rigged some patch programs into your battle computer. Should work almost as well, but I can’t be sure until we try them out.”

“It seems we Earthies are behind the times.”

“Yes ... but only in weapons technology. Your store issues *wonderful* chocolate.”

She patted her tunic pocket significantly.

“Glad we do something right.”

“Your torpedoes are Special Dynamics Type 7.”

“They are.”

“*Utopia Plain* was being loaded with them when I was tapped to come here. Too bad this is just a dummy shoot. I look forward to using them later on the Gloops when we play for keeps. They say the Type 7 guidance system borders on thinking.”

“An engineering myth.”

“Good. I’d hate to think of consciousness married to a neutronic warhead.”

After she finished her meal, Cy said, “So, Masaki, what kind of carnivore are you?”

“If we adjourn to our battle stations you can find out.”

They left B deck mess, Cy going forward along a curving corridor to Main Fire Control, 'Guns' Jalta sliding down a ladder one deck to the Auxiliary Station. She would continue to hear him over the combat link for the next twenty-three minutes, though that was the last time she would ever see him.

A fit of shivering gripped her as she sat in the wet purple grass beneath the dripping mushroom trees.

"Masaki?" she muttered, then raised her head and yelled, "George!"

The rain continued to fall and no one answered. No ghost came to argue, came to stare at her with disapproving eyes.

All about her were the trees, the grass, the rain. Who was George? For the moment she couldn't remember. But Masaki ... Masaki, she was certain, was dead.

"Stand-by!" the 5D Room announced. "Thirty seconds to emergence!"

Cy said, "Do you have the skipping pattern ready, Masaki?"

"Plugged in," he said over the combat link.

"Very good." She studied her fire control panel for the hundredth time, as she'd been obsessively doing the past fifteen minutes: blank screens, dead gauges.

The ship's laser banks were cranked down to 10%, barely enough to register virtual damage with the battle computer. All launch tubes were loaded with telemetry probes which would act the part of a neutron torpedo and do everything a real neutron torpedo would, except detonate and lethally distort a massive volume of space itself. At launch the probes would begin transmitting trajectory and probability of target interception, then just before impact vaporize themselves. Even a fragile telemetry probe impacting at one-tenth light speed could do a lot of damage.

Lights winked green right across Cy's board. All were in position, from the Captain to the handlers in the Torpedo Room. She opened communications circuits, and in a clear and formal tone said, "Weapons deck, Scanner Room, Lieutenant De Gerch at Primary Fire. Stand by."

Acknowledgment lights winked.

She loved these moments. She hated these moments.

Opening the link to Captain Bokka, she said, "Sir, Fire Control reporting. All weaponry sections ready for emergence."

"Thank you, Ms ... er ..."

"De Gerch, sir. Lieutenant, Martian Star Corps, temporarily re-assigned from frigate *Utopia Plain*." She glanced behind and up, but got only an impression of a thin, austere man, somewhat older than normal for a starship captain. Thirty-five or so, she thought.

"Yes, Ms De Gerch, our borrowed Martian," said Captain Bokka. "Sorry we haven't been able to confer yet. I look forward to your assessment of our fire control systems after we've played tag with *Moreton Bay*."

"It should prove interesting, sir."

"An understatement, Lieutenant. I've never met a product of the Gartino genetics experiment, and I must admit, Ms De Gerch, that I consider you a somewhat spooky young woman, considering what you do."

"I do my job, sir," replied Cy De Gerch, who had heard that sort of remark before in its many variations and had grown used to it. *At least he didn't say 'freaky,'* she thought.

"*Utopia Plain* ... you're one of Captain Brown's people?"

"Yes, sir. I'm his Exec and astrogator."

"And his 'guns' too. A good captain is Ralph Brown."

"Yes, sir," said Cy, suspecting he'd meant to add 'for a Martian.'

“Learn a lot from him. Doubtless you can teach him a few new gunnery tricks. Teach us too.”

“Perhaps, sir.”

“Very good then, Ms De Gerch. Let’s see what you can do.”

Oh Christ, she thought.

McMurdo Sound plunged out of subspace.

The stars sparkled onto screens, vanished, returned, vanished, returned, the universe and all reality there and gone, there and gone in an irregular rhythm as *McMurdo Sound* skipped in and out of dimension, never in one place long enough to be a target. Now she cruised the outer edge of the system, now flashing through an asteroid belt, now passing the rocky middle worlds, now arrowing through the shadows of the warm inner planets, each time closing with the white disc of the star Alpha Electra.

Nothing yet on the weapons sensors. But *Moreton Bay*, sister-ship, hunted and hunter, was out there ... sooner or later.

“You know, Masaki,” said Cy, watching meters, watching the hologram of surrounding space, “this might not quite turn out as Command is anticipating.”

“It’s a bit late to bring that up now, isn’t it?” he replied in his usual light bantering tone.

“It’s ... it’s too cold blooded. Too un-blooded.”

“How do you mean, Cy? No real threat? No real kill?”

“Yes. We all know no one’s going to get hurt, no one’s in any real danger. I think Terran Command’s going to get a skewed result from me.”

“Then how do Gartinios drill?”

“Like everyone else ... though sometimes my captain cries wolf. One time ...” She laughed, remembering. “One time I nearly scorched another Martian frigate the captain

had deliberately sooled me onto. Had her pinned dead in the sights. Only her I.F.F. signals locking out the firing sequence saved her. Captain Brown's worked with me long enough to learn that a Gartino's efficiency in war gaming is noticeably less compared to when we face a real threat."

"That probably applies to everyone who's ever been in a combat situation."

"Sure. But not enough to effect an outcome. Normally when soldiers are good in training and exercises they're just as good in combat. Masaki, when we Gartinis play games we do all right. But when we're against the real thing we're extraordinary. We need that thrill of danger."

McMurdo Sound stabilized in real space and ploughed on at a little under two hundred thousand kilometres per second, easing into a wide orbit of the star Alpha Electra, watching for *Moreton Bay*, waiting for her to strike.

A minute, two minutes, three. A gauge on Lieutenant De Gerch's weapons board quivered. At the same instant or perhaps a heartbeat before, she felt something stir like a worm inside her head. The deep range repeater holograph showed an image at its outer limits of sensing: course, speed, identification undetermined. Maybe an asteroid or large meteor, maybe *Moreton Bay*.

Course data flickered against the image. *Moreton Bay*. It had to be. And yet ...

It didn't feel right. That worm in her head squirmed again.

By now she should've reported contact on the weapons sensors. Instead she hesitated.

"Unidentified contact," said Lieutenant Jalta over the link. It was not normally Auxiliary's job to announce contacts, and admonishment was plain in his tone.

"Stand by," De Gerch said levelly. Ignoring her instruments, she closed her eyes, looking within. Something was wrong here. Something was very wrong. Not that she

wasn't interfacing with the Terrain system -- in fact she could feel her mind merging with it beautifully. Something else ...

There it was: the answer. Not in the hologram, not on the sensors, but in her head.

"All lasers crank up!" she ordered. "Torpedo Room! All tubes with neutros -- Load! Load! Load!"

The captain's expecting spooky? Now he has it. Deal with it, sir.

"Cy," came Masaki's voice full of surprise, "What are you --"

"It's not *Moreton Bay*," she said. "And it's not alone!"

Her mind divided, one, two, three, taking in each Xenoid vessel individually: range, speed, course, bearing. White light and numbers raced through her head, precious seconds before the hologram's tentative ID and range appeared against a single target image, only splitting into three several seconds later. The rest of the ship was finally catching up with her.

The foremost target centred in the sensors. Her mind dragged the forward guns around, but it was almost like pain waiting that instant for the captain's order.

C'mon c'mon!

"Engage! Engage! Engage!" the Captain said.

"Forward lasers -- Fire!"

The guns howled, faint at first, but swiftly reaching full charge and singing its strong one-note song.

"Target bearing one seventy by ten!" said Masaki Jalta as *McMurdo Sound* went into erratic zigzags. "Sorry I doubted you, Cy."

"Trust me," she said.

“Target ID: two, maybe three hostiles!” said Scanner Room, still lagging behind the girl at Fire Control who already knew it was three. A moment, then: “Laser hit on lead vessel.”

Keeping the Xenoid ships sharp focused in her head Cy swung the hologram around, locking onto the lead ship.

The Torpedo Ready lights lit.

“Fire!”

Six neutron torpedoes exploded from their tubes.

The enemy ships began to spread out, their forward lasers firing.

Cy took in a short, sharp breath. Her eyes grew vacant, an idiot smile twitched at her lips, and she took no notice of her scans. “Port lasers amidships swing your arc ... Fire!”

Even as the trailing Xenoid ship changed course it was met by the sweeping beams, anticipated, sliced through.

A new target appeared within the hologram, racing in from the right. Cy veered her mind toward it, bringing the starboard lasers to bear, then just as suddenly turned away again.

It was *Moreton Bay*, closing with all guns blazing.

Someone give a whoop of glee. Perhaps a tech or officer in the control room, perhaps a voice over the link from Scanner Room, perhaps Masaki Jalta at Auxiliary.

But Cy De Gerch was only dimly aware of the voices, her mind following the torpedoes she'd launched. The missiles, two, three, four of her six shot salvo, had locked onto the left flanking Xenoid ship. The enemy was putting out interference on a thousand wavelengths in an attempt to disrupt the torpedoes' sensors, causing her brain to reel. The inside of her head felt as if two magnets were pushing together like-poles. But it was

nothing she hadn't encountered before, and weave how it would, the Xenoid ship was dead. She knew this with quiet certainty.

Then it happened.

As the Torpedo Ready lights re-lit, as *Moreton Bay* launched torpedoes, as the Xenoid ship inevitably met Cy's salvo, as it exploded in the holograph -- "Fucked your day, Johnny Gloop," she whispered, eyes wide -- as all this happened, three lasers sliced *McMurdo Sound* through the guts, breaking her back amidships.

The hull shattered. Fires raged. Lighting and gravity failed. An unholy wail of human voices and a stutter of mighty detonations as *McMurdo Sound* disintegrated about her and died.
