

# THE HALFERNE IMPRECAATION

---

By Darrin Snider



**DRAFT 0: EXCERPT**  
(FOR PROMOTIONAL USE ONLY)

# THE HALFERNE IMPRECATION

by Darrin Snider

*Draft 1 -- 15 May 2023*

## Revision History

Draft 1	Original Draft	March 2023

# CONTENTS

Revision History .....	ii
Contents .....	iii
Chapter One .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter Two .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter Three .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Appendix .....	23
About the Author .....	23
Afterword .....	23
Links .....	23
Bibliography of Unfinished Works by the Author .....	23

# THE HALFERNE IMPRECATION

by Darrin Snider

## Chapter One

Depending on how you looked at it, the operating theater was either a hodgepodge of jerry-rigged pieces of barely functioning equipment expertly tricked into performing functions they were never designed to do, or it was a work of masterful sculpture, formed out of nothing, merely willed into existence by a virtuoso artist. The artist in question, Dr. Katerin Rossi, carefully examined her patient's vitals on a bio-display -- originally a generic imaging sensor designed to spot stress fractures in metal that had been repurposed with all-new software. Everything about the hospital ship was a concession to budgetary constraints and bureaucratic limitations; even the ship itself was a repurposed passenger liner that had seen better, more glamorous days.

The surgical bay was an octagonal room approximately 10 meters across with four operating beds and four portable diagnostic labs at the vertices. The center hub contained a variety of devices, equipment, and components that were shared among each. A sterilization field surrounded each bed which contained one human patient and two attending medical professionals, at least one of whom was human. There was almost no sound in the room aside from the occasional command, status update, or inquiry. If one were to stumble into the room, the urgency of the situation and the struggle against life and death would not be immediately apparent.

For more desperate times, the ship had eight such bays that could be staffed, as well as additional active and passive care facilities for an additional 200 people. Currently, Sacrum Cor's available membership and budget only allowed for this one small section of the ship to be active, however.

Kat watched the medical done with its spider-like array of arms and implements, all expertly operated by Rep. Dr. Melodi Burton, as it finished repairing a damaged artery and began suturing the comatose patient. She had every confidence in her friend and mentor, who had an illustrious career while alive, and an equally distinguished one in the 24 years since her untimely passing. In reality, Kat's presence during the surgery was merely a formality in case something happened to require an extra pair of hands or eyes.

"Looks like you got it, Mel. How many left?" Kat asked.

"This is it, fortunately. Dr. Adams took the last one over there on bed 2," the drone replied via a speaker as it hovered noiselessly over the patient's abdomen. "Compound fracture of the fibula and a moderate concussion. You can assist if him you want, but they think he's almost done."

"He'll be more upset at having to catch me up than relieved that I went to help him in the first place," she yawned.

It had been a long stretch for everyone, far longer than was typical for the team. The St. Pantaleon, their makeshift hospital frigate, had been dispatched to the system to rendezvous with a military assault craft that had been heavily damaged in some sort of operation. Being a civilian service craft, they were never privy to those types of details, just the casualties and a general idea of what caused them. It had taken fourteen hours to reach the wrecked and drifting destroyer, by which time six of the wounded had already perished. Sixteen others had various injuries including burns, broken bones, internal damage from projectile wounds, chemical inhalation, exposure to space, and in one case, electrocution. Kat was proud that they had saved all but one unfortunate crew member, while the rest would soon be resting peacefully in the recovery bay with the worst of the injured expected to make a full recovery and return to duty within a week. In the meantime, a military tug and escort would be arriving within forty-eight hours to begin repairs and escort the cruiser back to base, two Q-gates away. The unspoken fear among the St. Pantaleon's crew was that whoever had managed to cripple a heavily armed military cruiser would return in the meantime to finish the job. As a civilian hospital and transport ship, they had only minimal defenses, and very few of the crew had any combat experience to speak of. Not to mention there was no guarantee that raiders would see a humanitarian medical core ship staffed mostly by volunteers, medical interns, and retired military officers to be "non-combatants."

"How long have you been on duty?"

"Just twenty-six hours." Kat raised her eyebrows in a mock expectant gesture indicating she was awake and alert.

Mel pointed a scanner at her. "Wow, all natural too. No stimulants. Just pure adrenaline. I'm impressed. You could probably go another fifteen or twenty minutes easily. Why don't you go get some dinner? I'll make a quick round in post-op to make sure everyone's settled in and brief the relief shift when they get here."

"You sure?" Kat asked. Mel had been on duty almost as long as she, and even though what was essentially a computer simulation of a formerly living person didn't physically require sleep, the electronic equivalent of neural pathways and biochemical processes were faithful to the original brain operated, right down to the simulated gradual buildup of adenosine over continuous operation. This required Mel to enter the equivalent of a sleep/dream state to recharge, just like a flesh and blood person. It always seemed odd to Kat that this very human limitation was kept to faithfully honor the basic limitations of the original form, but then it was a key part of personality and behavior, so it was probably the reason nobody ever noticed the difference between a living human and their reproduced consciousness.

"Absolutely," Mel said, trying to sound chipper. "I'll be done here in ten minutes and meet you back in our quarters. We can get in a couple of games of Zhanshu before you fall over."

"Heaven knows you could use the handicap," Kat chided. "Okay, you're on, but I'll make the trip through post-op for you." She stepped back from the sterilization field surrounding the Mel/drone and her patient, slipped off her gown, and started towards the recovery bay.

She entered what should have been a quiet, dimly-lit room with 14 sleeping patients, but instead found seven of the patients sitting up in their beds, concerned looks on their faces, while a tall man in an officer's uniform was screaming and beating another of the patients with what appeared to be a swagger stick of some form.

"-- and so help me, Corporal, I am going to have you court-martialed out of the service before those bruises even begin to heal, you traitorous scum!" the officer screamed and swung the stick again, striking the helpless patient on the back as he attempted to crawl out of the bed, held fast by a suspensor field that suppressed his control over the lower half of his body to avoid tearing his dermal patches.

Kat quickly smashed her finger on the wall panel, summoning security to the recovery bay. "What the hell is going on here?!" she screamed as she moved to interpose herself between the two of them.

"Step away, miss!" the big man screamed.

"It's Doctor, actually," Kat said, attempting to make herself as tall as she could. Even though she was slightly above average in height and muscularly built for a scientist, she still fell eight inches and at 45 kilograms shy of the mark.

"Well then, Doctor, perhaps you can explain to me why this man got treated before some of the people whose injuries he's directly responsible for?"

"We're not a tribunal, and we don't discriminate injuries in situations like these. We treat based on most urgent need to least urgent need."

"This cowardly scum is directly responsible for letting those bastards on my ship. He's the reason seven of his fellow crewmates are dead and the rest of these fine soldiers are sleeping in a hospital instead of their own bunks tonight! He's a traitor to the uniform and should be in prison! I want him restrained and kept away from the rest of these men."

"He's my patient, and I'm his doctor!" Kat shouted back, attempting to match the man's outrage. "You will get each of these men back when I decide they're fit for duty. Meanwhile, visiting hours are tomorrow from 1200 to 1600 hours. Until then, you will stay the hell out of my recovery bay!"

"You have no authority over me," the man snarled. "You're a civilian. Probably not even an Earth Union citizen judging by your accent."

"It doesn't matter what I am," Kat growled. "In this room, my authority is supreme. Even our Captain answers to me." As if on cue, the door on the opposite end of the room opened and two security guards strode in, headed directly for the two of them. She was reasonably certain they wouldn't be a match for the officer. They didn't exactly have trained security personnel on the ship, just five guys who rarely had to do more than hold down irate or delirious patients and keep them from hurting themselves. If the big guy wanted a fight, she was pretty sure it would end with those two occupying the last couple of beds in the recovery room.

After eyeing the two newcomers for less than three seconds, the officer scoffed audibly and moved to shove Kat out of the way to take on his new opponents.

This was his first mistake.

Kat deftly pivoted to her left, grabbed the big man's arm with her right hand to make sure the follow-through kept him off balance, then with a practiced motion, removed a hypo from her belt and

aimed it at the first patch of bare skin she saw on his neck. There was a confirmation beep and the indicator showing the small cylinder was dispersing the fast-acting tranquilizer into his system. The officer struggled vainly for a few seconds as Kat moved behind him, making sure the hypo stayed firmly placed on his neck. Finally, as he began to lose consciousness, she subtly shifted him to make sure his face hit the floor instead of the bed in front of him, mentally writing it off as "protecting her patient from further injury."

"Lock him in the stateroom and inform the Captain," she said to the two guards, then looking around at the collection of patients who sat, jaws agape, added, "And the rest of you, go back to sleep!"

She heard everyone frantically returning to prone positions as she exited the recovery bay.

\*\*\*\*\*

"You did what?!" Mel asked incredulously.

Though the voice came from their quarters' sound system, Kat directed her gaze and reply at the multi-colored parrot sitting on a perch in the corner of the room which currently served as Mel's conscious receptors. "I knocked him out with 30cc's of Pentoheptalol IV and had security lock him in a stateroom."

"That's ballsy. Have you seen his record?"

"I don't even know his name."

"Seriously? Don't you look up history on your patients? Aren't you curious as to who you're working on and why?"

"I don't have the luxury of transhuman perceptions than can perform dozens of tasks at once. Most of the time I'm trying to keep my mind focused and my breakfast down while I'm putting people's organs back inside them."

"Those soldiers today were a special detachment of Earth Union Defense, Third Operations Division, assigned to this system to quell the increasing attacks from raiders. The commanding officer's name is Colonel Maximiliaan Emerens," Mel offered. "Nineteen confirmed kills over a dozen successful combat missions. They call him 'The Fist.' He's probably the most experienced and decorated infantry officer in the Union."



"He's a bully. I did my time in the military. I know his type. He was mad that he lost men under his command. He was mad he got out-smarted and out-maneuvered by a bunch of undisciplined, backstabbing pirates. He was mad that he had to call Fleet Command and report failure and a disabled ship. He had every right to be mad, but someone in his position should be able to control his emotions and not take it out on an injured soldier under his command who was half in a stasis field and unable to defend himself."

"He's got a spotless military record. He's got connections going all the way up to the top of Earth government. Assaulting, drugging, and humiliating him in front of his own men was probably not exactly the wisest move on your part."

Kat shook her head, "I don't care. He was using a cane and attacking a patient under my care. Whatever his reasons, it doesn't matter, that crosses a line not only for a superior officer but for us as doctors. It doesn't matter if it was one of the raiders who'd killed his entire division, our job is to heal and let fate sort the rest out, but right until they're healed, their fate is our responsibility."

"I'm not disagreeing with your philosophy," Mel offered. "It's your tactics that are in question. You should have let security do their job and stuck to healing. Maybe, as you say, he let his emotions get the way of his judgment, but you need to be better than that."

"I acted definitively. You said it yourself, that Colonel was a trained killer? What experience do our security guys have? Restraining the occasional orderly who has too much to drink in the lounge?"

"They're also trained in de-escalation and restraint."

"So am I, my way is just quicker and more efficient," Kat offered, though her tone was less-and-less convincing.

"Look, I know you hate hearing stuff like this, but there are a lot of competent people around here. Not everything and everyone answers to the whim of Dr. Kat Rossi."

"You think I don't know that?"

"I think you know it on a logical level, but you still tend to make rash decisions when the world doesn't end up the way you want it to."

"He was beating a patient. I had to act."

"Did you even consider what would happen to you when the Colonel wakes up tomorrow and lodges a formal complaint with the Captain? What happens if you're removed from duty and we're down a physician when the emergency comes up?"

Kat thought for a moment, then slowly nodded her begrudging agreement. "Okay, I'll admit I was being a bit selfish, but I still think my fast, definitive action was the right thing to do. If the Captain relieves me of duty tomorrow, I'll thank him for it."

## Chapter Two

"What the hell am I supposed to do with this, Rossi?" Captain Parker Radcliffe pleaded; his head buried in his hands. "You followed proper protocol, right up until you didn't, and now we've got a full-fledged incident on our hands. What's worse is that you don't even show the slightest bit of remorse, so it's not like I can, in good conscience, just let you off with a written warning, a couple of weeks on administrative duty, and just say that you've learned your lesson."

Kat stood impassive in front of the captain's desk in the closest thing she could muster to military attention while acknowledging, and reminding the captain, that Sacrum Cor was a civilian organization; not a military one. Technically, while his authority was absolute in the daily operation of the St. Pantaleon, her service was ultimately voluntary, and she could resign her post at any time and complete the final year of her residency in a planetary medical center. The incident would only be a minor professional stain, assuming the Colonel even bothered to pursue personal charges of assault against her. Radcliffe's exasperated expression indicated he was aware of this.

"I did the right thing," she said, with no hint of doubt in her voice. "I acknowledge it wasn't the convenient thing from your perspective but based on the options and likely outcomes available at the time, I prevented a much larger situation that you now do not have to deal with."

"Off the record? I know that, and I appreciate it. Officially, however, assaulting a military officer, endangering patients, and abuse of medical supplies cannot go unanswered. Unfortunately, we're understaffed and not due back to port for another three months. So, in the meantime here's what we're going to do: You are confined to quarters until such time as the Colonel is off this ship, and I suggest you do nothing further to remind him of your existence. Once he is gone, you may resume normal work duties, but when not on duty, you will remain confined to quarters for the duration of this tour. You are not to be seen in any part of the ship that is not in a direct walking path between your quarters and Medbay One."

"Understood," Kat said, silently relieved. She rarely went anywhere except the medical bay and her quarters anyway, aside from maybe the commissary, though she preferred to eat alone.

"Now, that said," Radcliffe sighed, "I can also tell you that Dr. Adams and Dr. Burton both submitted formal compliments on your performance over the last couple of days. Adams in particular says that you are a skilled surgeon with an impressive capacity to handle stressful situations. Dr. Burton

praised your bedside manner and intrinsic desire to care for everyone and find solutions to any problem be it technical, medical, or personal. She adds that your new makeshift bioscanners likely saved several lives over the past two days. I'll take the timing of Burton's note with a grain of salt, knowing you two are close, but Adams doesn't like anybody, so that's high praise."

Kat stifled a smile. "I'll have to try to live up to the compliment then."

Radcliffe rolled his eyes slightly. "As long as you're here, I haven't yet read any of the official reports. What's the status down there?"

"Six dead and sixteen wounded when we arrived. We lost one in surgery, but frankly, he was barely alive when we found him. Their medic was apparently one of the first killed, so first aid was competent but limited. I would guess almost half of the wounded would have died within hours if we hadn't gotten there when we did. As it is, every one of them is now stable and in recovery. The worst of them will be ready to return to duty within a week."

"Recommendations? Lessons learned?"

"The makeshift scanners may have helped, but only because we've got some very experienced surgeons on staff who made up for their shortcomings. We still need to get some modern equipment that was designed for this type of work, at least in Medbay One. I know budgets are tight and we can't expect all bays to be state of the art, but we can be so much more efficient with one fully functional operating theater."

"Syn Dr. Upton agrees with your assessment on that. He's been running readiness scenarios and is preparing a presentation to the board to get us a number of significant upgrades. While wars and military conflicts are few and far between, he's got some nightmare scenarios involving industrial accidents and planetary epidemics he plans to show. I'm optimistic that will give the board incentive to start allocating funds our way. Meanwhile--"

Radcliffe was cut off by the sound of his office door opening to reveal his assistant, Yeoman Harmon trying his best to keep Colonel Emerens from entering but failing miserably. Both men were shouting over each other making various petty threats.

"Captain, I'm sorry, he just—"

"It's fine, Yeoman," Radcliffe said, holding up a hand. "Colonel, please come in."

"Captain," the Colonel acknowledged stepping into the room. He caught sight of Kat and nodded. "Doctor," he said, almost pleasantly, as if meeting her for the first time.

"Colonel," Kat said, attempting to conceal the awkwardness.

"What can I do for you, Colonel?" Radcliffe asked.

"We've received new orders from Command. Scout drones have located what they believe to be the Ranger's main base in this area on a moon orbiting the seventh planet. We're to go in, assess their strength, gather what intel we can about the overall operation, and take them out if possible. Otherwise, we'll be on the ground markers for a bombardment or mass incursion."

"That's all well and good, Colonel, but why come to me? What does that have to do with Sacrum Cor and the St. Pantaleon?"

"I have two requests. First, I've lost twenty-nine of my men in the past two days, that's over half my crew. Of my active personnel, just eight are combat-trained infantry. I was hoping some of the ones in your care could be released early for this mission."

Radcliffe looked at Kat. "It's her call."

"Absolutely not," she said in her most even and final tone, fighting to keep emotion out of her voice.

"I didn't think so," Emerens admitted. "Second request: I lost my medic in the firefight. I'm not enamored with the idea of going into hostile territory without one, and the nearest replacement is still more than a day away. With your permission, I would like to request that Dr. Rossi here join my squad."

Kat let out a disbelieving cough. "You're kidding, right?"

"I looked up your record, Doctor. You spent three years in the service. You've never been a field medic, but you're combat trained and a qualified doctor who has experience in crisis management and non-optimal surgical situations, and I think we've both seen your mental and physical reflexes are sharp under pressure."

"Yes, but you're plainly forgetting that I don't like you, Colonel."

"Show me a grunt who can think for himself that doesn't hate his superior officer. Everyone thinks they can do this job better. I'm used to that." The colonel smiled slightly. "I'm not going to admit I

was out of line yesterday, and I sure as hell know you're not going to admit you were wrong, but I'm willing to bet we can put that little incident behind us without anyone else knowing about it in the interest of keeping my boys a little bit safer for a couple of days. Or am I wrong about that?"

The threat was not lost on Kat. She looked to Radcliffe who simply stared passively back at her. The choices were confinement to quarters and possibly being drummed out of the order when the Colonel pressed charges, versus the potential for being wounded or killed in battle due to her complete lack of actual combat experience.

She thought about the ship and her crewmates. She thought about Sacrum Cor and why she had joined. She thought about the many reasons she became a doctor. Most of all she thought about Syn Dr. Upton being impressed with her makeshift bioscanner and realized that's just what she did; what she enjoyed doing. She took things that were otherwise useless and made them work for everyone. Now, it seemed, she herself had become the makeshift invention that would be filling a role it wasn't designed for.

She sealed her fate with a defeated nod to the colonel.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ondrej Klement was exhausted, though he knew he had no right to complain about it. During the previous days' action, he'd randomly drawn first relief, which meant, after pulling twenty straight hours, he and two compatriots were the first to get the minimum six hours of sack time before coming back and relieving the next group. That was twelve hours ago. He'd given up trying to figure out what time it was, whether he was currently on day shift or night shift, and who in the Med Bay had been on duty the longest. Eventually, things would return to normal. In the meantime, everyone was suffering, and anyone who even dared to yawn would be met with glares and snarls. This was the life they signed on for, and if it ended up being less glamorous than expected, there was no point in complaining now.

"Bed 19, Corporal Davis," he said in his most energetic tone as the bed automatically tilted its patient to something closer to a sitting position, and a lap table unfolded itself over the man's lap. "Chow time. Sorry it's late, the galley didn't get your dietary requirements correct and had to remake it." He placed the tray on the table and removed the covering with a flourish and chef's kiss.

"Dietary requirements?" Davis asked, confused.

Ondrej summoned the Corporal's file on his wrist terminal and flipped through to the dietary section. "Yeah, says here you get extra portions of lean protein and Vitamin B7. You didn't know that?"

Davis raised an eyebrow, "Yeah, sorry, I forgot. Our doc put me on that a couple of days ago after my last physical." His face turned somber. "It's been a rough couple of days if you know what I mean. Now the doc is gone. A lot of good people are."

"I understand," Ondrej said, instantly regretting the words. He was sure he only thought he understood.

"You must see this kind of stuff a lot, eh?"

"Not as often as you'd think," Ondrej said, trying to recover from the previous gaff. He'd never been in combat, never seen combat, and until yesterday had never treated anyone who had been in combat. He decided to keep the circumstances vague, as the Corporal seemed to be relishing the comradery.

"Do you ever get used to it? I mean, the brutality that people can inflict on each other without any remorse or emotion of any kind?"

"I hope I don't. I think it's what keeps us human."

"How do you face it though? Those guys there," Davis gestured to the other men in beds, some eating, some sleeping, none of them paying any attention to their conversation, "they weren't even phased by any of it. It was like they have some kind of switch they can just turn off that lets them fight, kill, and risk their lives to save each other without any hesitation or doubt. How can people be like that? I don't think they're quite human anymore."

Suddenly it dawned on Ondrej. This was the one he'd heard about. The one the Colonel called a coward and blamed for the casualties and the near loss of the ship.

"So, tell me, Doc, what compelled you to come all the way out here instead of some cushy job planet-side?"

"Well, first of all, I'm not a doctor ... yet. I'm still in my internship. This is my first job out of school."

"More than you bargained for, I'll bet."

"It's normally not this intense, no." Somewhere in the back of his mind, however, he secretly enjoyed all of it. While he was merely an intern, the experience he had gotten in the last two days alone, along with what he was sure would be glowing recommendations from the staff of the St. Pantaleon, he was almost guaranteed a residence at almost any medical center desired. He was certain, however, that he would find the pace too slow for his liking, and not challenging enough for what he acknowledged was a bit of an ego and bloated sense of self-importance.

"So why do it then?"

"Well, I graduated in the top ten of my class at University Bratislava and got several offers for residency at prestigious medical centers both on Earth and in the controlled colonies. In my heart, though, I knew I had to be in space. I'd never had a chance to go in my entire life. Originally, I hoped to be a ship's physician on one of the star liners, or possibly one of the junction stations. I wanted to make the occasional trip to exotic places, or at least meet people from those places – really get to know all the worlds. Anyway, one of my favorite professors recommended Sacrum Cor which, while not nearly as luxurious, did offer invaluable experience in a limited shipboard med bay and spoke well of my character and dedication to what he called 'the spirit of the medical profession.'"

"Well, I think I can speak for all the guys when I say we're glad you did. I've never felt so relieved in my life as when I saw your ship coming up on us in the black. Those hours waiting for rescue were horrible."

Ondrej pulled up a stool and sat down at eye level with the Corporal. "You want to talk about it?"

Davis' face went somber, and he began avoiding eye contact. "Nothin' to say really. We thought we had the drop on those raider bastards. Caught their command ship with the fighters still in the bay and everything. When we boarded it, though, it turned out to be a honeypot. Four war drones were all it took to cut off our boarding party and pin them in the ship. Every trick they tried to outsmart them, the raiders were one step ahead. Then in the middle of it, the real command ship and the real fighters showed up. They disabled us in seconds. When they boarded, it was just me and these guys left defending the ship, but when the time came, I froze. Even though I had a superior tactical position, better weaponry and armor, and one of the most fearsome squads in the Union beside me, I just froze and let them walk right past me. I sat there while they killed and maimed my friends and almost take the



whole damned ship. I couldn't move." Tears began to well up in his eyes. "The Colonel was right. I was a coward and traitor to my unit."

"Hey," Ondrej put a hand on the Corporal's arm, "You're being too hard on yourself. It's shock. It happens. Your brain was placed in an unfamiliar situation and your body sent a whole flood of chemicals and stimulation to it which caused it to freeze up in a sense. That's completely human and very easy to let happen. But, it's also human to learn to live with the pain of your failures and learn from it so that next time you can deal with it."

Davis nodded slightly, still fighting back tears and not daring to look at Ondrej. It was obvious he'd heard the story before, probably in basic training. While it was humiliating, tragic, and unfortunate, Davis would have to forgive himself or let the guilt consume him. Ondrej, while pleased with his bedside manner, knew he wasn't a trained counselor, however, and made a mental note to recommend one in Davis' file when he got back to the monitoring station. He quietly excused himself, and left the room, not wanting to press the issue any further. It was more important that Davis had his dinner and got some much needed rest at this point anyway.

The monitoring station in the next room was lit more dimly than usual and contained only two orderlies who sat in one corner analyzing lab results. Ondrej walked over to his own assigned station and spent the next fifteen minutes filling in his logs for the evening.

"Mr. Klement, have you finished the rounds?" a holo of Mel Burton's former self said as it appeared next to him, or at least it was herself as she appeared in her late forties, probably half a century ago now, he decided, assuming he remembered her bio correctly. He made it a point to study the personal histories of everyone he worked with.

"Not yet, Dr. Burton. A couple of the patients had special dietary requirements which the galley got wrong. They're finishing up their meals now, after which I'll make sure they've taken their meds, and then we'll be done for this shift."

"Good. What about Bed 19, Corporal Davis?"

"He's one of the two who's just finishing dinner," Ondrej said, hoping he had guessed right, and it actually was evening instead of morning.

Mel frowned. "His vitals seem to be a bit off." Her observation was met with a series of graphs and numbers that appeared in the air in front of Ondrej. "What do you make of it?"

Ondrej studied the telemetry but made it a point not to take too long, in case this was Dr. Burton's idea of a cruel pop quiz. "Hmmm. Labored breathing, slight drop in body temperature and blood pressure. Symptoms point to anaphylaxis, but there's nothing about allergies in his profile, and he's not showing elevated histamines."

Without prompting from Mel, he quickly grabbed a diagnostic scanner and started towards the recovery bay. He arrived at Bed 19 to find Mel had already redirected her holo to that station's emitter. A scanning arm lowered itself from the ceiling and began scanning the body. The food on the tray was only half-eaten. Ondrej pulled the plates off to the side and retracted the table.

"Davis? Davis, can you hear me?" He gently shook the Corporal, who he would have sworn appeared to be asleep aside from a slight blue pallor in his lips and the fact that his skin was cold and clammy.

"He's entering arrhythmia," Mel said calmly. "What the hell is this?"

Ondrej tapped a series of commands on the scanner, which whirred and lit up with a series of different lights and patterns. "Toxicology negative. Allergic reaction negative. Infection negative. Some unusual neurological activity but I can't tell if it's a cause or a symptom."

"I've never seen anything like it?"

Ondrej had a feeling it was better to act than to continue to Davis' symptoms to worsen much more. "Cordrazine?" he offered.

Mel nodded intently. "Start with 20cc's, and get a cardio stabilizer on him."

Ondrej called up a series of commands on the console to fill the hypo with the proper drug and dosage, then grabbed it from its station and injected it into Davis' neck in one motion. Instantly the corporal lurched in his bed, his face contorted in pain.

"He's seizing," Mel said, voice still calm. "Cardio stabilizer is not effective."

With a grunt that almost sounded like frustration, Davis convulsed one last time then went limp. All of the monitoring readouts gradually faded back to their inevitable default state. Though automated systems within the cardio stabilizer attempted to shock his heart and system back to normal, after a few moments of silence it was plainly obvious that Corporal Davis was irretrievably dead.

## Chapter Three

"I'm telling you, in a century of practicing medicine, I've never lost a patient like that. There's something very 'not right' about this whole thing."

"I really wish you weren't a parrot when you're trying to be serious like this," Kat complained, speaking directly to the bird. "And what do you mean by 'not right?' Accidental misdiagnosis? Suicide? Murder? What?" She was still fanatically packing a small trunk at the foot of her bed. Colonel Emerens had not said what supplies and gear his team had that she could make use of, so she made a careful assessment of everything available. Fatigues were first and foremost. The ship had fabricated a pair of standard civilian medic combat fatigues which she modified by keeping the relevant insignia and marks but adjusting the color and fabric for the stealthy nature of the mission at hand. Next went her personal datapad, which included a veritable library of texts specializing in makeshift surgery and battle tactics for combat medics, all of which she planned to study during the flight. The remainder of her requested medical gear was being packed and stowed separately by St. Pantaleon technicians, but she decided on using what little space remained in her trunk to throw in a spare scanner and two portable medkits on the off chance someone else in the squad had the capacity to be a backup medic.

Mel's holo materialized in human form occupying the lounge chair in the corner of the room and smirking at her. "I don't know, it could be any of those. It could be something else entirely. All I know is, based on the last rounds made by you, verified by Syn Dr. DeWitt, and reviewed by myself, there was nothing in that kid's scans that should have killed him, much less in a matter of minutes like that."

"Nothing in the autopsy?"

"No pathogens, no toxins, nothing unusual. That leaves genetic. Syn Dr. Martinez has graciously agreed to do a complete workup in his 'free time' later today."

"Well, that must be it then. Something genetic, triggered and exacerbated by all the stress of the past few days. What else could it be?"

Mel leaned forward and clasped her hands in an oddly fidgety way, Kat wondered if it was intentional or a leftover habit from when she was alive that had carried over into her transhuman form. "Just before he died, Davis told Ondrej about how they boarded what they thought was a raider command ship. It turned out to be a series of elaborate and well-planned traps that took out half of the Colonel's troops. During that time, the raiders breached the Colonel's cruiser and nearly wiped the rest

of them out. A full squad was outsmarted and taken out in minutes by drones, but the remaining crew of essentially support troops, medics, and technicians fought off a superior force of raiders and saved the ship."

Kat shook her head, remembering the basic tactics she learned from her time in the military. "Defensive positions are usually good against five-to-one odds if not more."

"Maybe, but they had that ship crippled and without life support. Why board at all? Why not wait until the crew was dead then just stroll in and take everything?"

"I don't know. You tell me," Kat said, rolling her eyes.

"Ever study the siege of Caffa?"

"I've never even heard of Caffa."

"It was back in the 14th century during the Mongol invasion of Europe. Janibeg Khan, a descendant of Genghis Khan laid siege to the Crimean city of Caffa and hurled the corpses of their own soldiers who had died of the bubonic plague over the walls of the city to infect the defenders with the disease. Eventually, it worked. The Mongols took the city, and those that fled spread the plague all over Europe."

"Raiders have a biological weapon of some sort and they're using the Colonel and his men as carriers? That doesn't make sense. Why is only one person dead then? Why isn't anyone else showing symptoms? If it's biological, why can't we detect it with our scanners?"

"You built most of those scanners. Are they really equipped for detecting previously unknown pathogens?"

Kat considered for a moment. Even the enhanced synthetic personalities on staff were only as good as the raw data they had to work with, and while the scanners were very good at getting down to a molecular level, there were vast differences between construction materials and organic materials. She decided to concede that point. "Okay, even if you're right, then what can I do about it? If Emerens and his men are infected and it's designed to spread through the entire Earth Union Defense Force, then odds are I am too, and so are you and everyone else on this ship. Even if I believed it was some sort of bioweapon, then I can either stay and be one more pair of hands working on finding out what it is and how to stop it, or I can go and maybe have a chance of finding the person or persons who know more

about it possibly learn more that way. Not to mention, if I don't go, the good Colonel will no doubt have me up on assault charges and thrown out of Sacrum Cor altogether. And, once again, may I remind you, you don't have a shred of evidence to corroborate any of this, to begin with?"

"Fine, you're right. You win. Just one more observation though."

"What's that?"

"Don't you think it's a little strange that the Colonel is leading this charge now, with less than a full assault team, knowing that a new complement of troops will be here in less than two days?"

Kat shook her head. "I assume because he's out for some payback after being humiliated last time, or maybe because he's concerned the raiders may come back and attack a civilian hospital ship?"

"A civilian hospital ship that he's leaving completely defenseless while he goes off on this little sortie. I'm just saying be careful and watch your back. I don't trust him."

"I always do ... and for what it's worth, I don't trust him either."

\*\*\*\*\*

It was a twelve-hour flight at maximum burn from the St. Pantaleon to Sigma Mirium VII – it probably had a dozen different names between system residents, academicians, scientists, cartographers, etc. but Kat, like most Earthers, preferred the arcane naming conventions for unsettled systems and worlds nobody in their right mind would ever visit. The troop carrier was only slightly larger than most hovertrain cars she'd ridden in, at least the parts she and the crew had access to. Then there was the crew itself, which consisted of the Colonel and the pilot, Private Tomine Brun, topside in the cockpit, with ten members of Squad 2 – now promoted to Squad 1 – along with Kat on the main deck and one elusive Warrant Officer on the equipment deck below them. He only seemed to appear sporadically in the galley every couple of hours to grab a meal bar, choosing not to associate with any of the others.

Kat did her best in the time given to learn as much as she could about the rest of her unit, as she considered herself responsible for their psychological well-being as much as their physical condition. She found each of them to be cordial enough, but still somehow distant. None of them, to their credit, showed any signs of post-traumatic stress from their previous fight with the raiders or the sudden, brutal loss of the more-experienced officers and the former Squad 1. On the other hand, none of them

were particularly friendly about offering up their personal thoughts and feelings. It wasn't that they were stand-offish or unpleasant, merely detached. The only one who even seemed to even remotely enjoy Kat's company was Corporal Suri Watanna, the only other female in the group. She had at least volunteered a bit of insight into the interpersonal workings of the unit beyond the half-hearted nods and grunts she got from the rest of them. She'd even gone as far as bringing Kat her dinner so that she didn't have to interrupt her crash course in combat medic tactics. Dinner consisted of the standard "meal in a box" that stacked in the hold efficiently, nourished and energized the body efficiently, and, unfortunately, tasted like a giant helping of efficiency as well. Say what you wanted about the makeshift equipment the Sacrum Cor stocked their ships with, but the chefs were downright miracle workers when it came to turning processed foods into gourmet meals.

The seventh planet was a gas giant with a thin, barely visible ring system around it, the tactical display at the front of the cabin showed twelve reasonably large moons in the 3000-5000K diameter range and nearly three times as many smaller masses in the 1000 to 1500K range. Their target was one of the larger moons, whose orbit brought it close enough to VII to make it a violent, volcanic hell. Near the south pole of that hell, situated deep within a mountain that Kat assumed to be dormant and stable, probes had detected an elaborate, multi-leveled construction, complete with a power plant driven from subterranean gasses and a docking bay big enough to hold a ship the size of the St. Pantaleon.

Emerens' drones patrolled a perimeter around the structure and had detected no movement in or out of the base during the eight hours since detecting it. Though electromagnetic interference made detailed scans of the interior difficult, current estimates were that as many as three dozen raiders were currently inside. The Colonel had already outlined for the troops a detailed plan to scout the area, making note of any potential points of ingress, or failing that, structural weak points for artillery bombardment that they could paint with sensors in the event of an orbital assault. Ideally, Emerens hoped that they could find a way to infiltrate and take the base with minimal damage. It seemed a shame to let such a fine construction go to waste when it could be used as the base of operations for Earth Union's defense forces in the system.

The longer Kat studied the mission details, the more Mel's warning stuck out in her mind. The urgency of a mission with these parameters made less and less sense the more she thought about it.

"T-minus fifteen minutes to LZ," the Colonel said over the intercom. The entire unit, already dressed in battle gear immediately went to the storage lockers at the far end of the cabin and began

retrieving their gear, powering equipment up, and checking readiness status. Kat had spent the entire trip in battle-ready status, not realizing how heavy the armor plates and various pieces of equipment she wore would be. At least the moon's gravity was less than half a standard G. It would probably be refreshingly comfortable once they were free of the ship's grav plates.

The monitor at the front of the cabin sounded a beeping alarm that made the entire squad go instantly silent. There, outlined in red, two small indicator dots appeared. Directional indicators showed that they were also headed towards the mountain base on a perpendicular course to their own.

"Contact at 300 mark 15," the Colonel confirmed over the com. "Looks like two fighter-class ships heading back to base. Prepare for LCU in ten seconds."

In unison, the entire unit stopped what they were doing, stowed all loose gear, and strapped themselves into their seats.

Kat turned to Suri. "LCU? What's LCU? Flight maneuvers and jargon weren't part of the material I prepped."

Suri arched one eyebrow and let out a hearty laugh. "It stands for 'lunch coming up,'" she said, tightening Kat's restraint before grabbing both shoulder straps. "They're going to dive for the deck in the hopes of using ground clutter to keep from being spotted."

On cue, Kat felt the front wall of the cabin become the floor of the cabin as the transport shed half its speed in a matter of seconds. Then with the combination of the grav plates fighting the increasing natural gravity of the planet and the ship changing pitch to keep the friction of the thickening atmosphere on the heat shields, she became completely disoriented. Outside the portholes, she saw the orange-red glow of gasses coming from this ship's hull as it heated up – or was it the orange-red gasses of the surface, or a lake of lava? Either way, without a horizon or the ability to orient herself as directions seemed to spin all around her, the term LCU suddenly went from a cute joke to an ominous warning. She focused her eyes on the monitor in front of her and forced herself to breathe deeply through her nose as an all-too-familiar salty taste crept into her mouth.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, it ended. The ship steadied its velocity and reoriented itself. Kat looked out the window and saw that they were cruising just a few dozen meters over the rocky terrain of the moon. She saw a complex pattern of lakes and rivers made out of lava, and out the port and

starboard windows, she saw two of the largest volcanic mountains she'd ever seen in her life. Far larger than even the peaks of Everest on Earth.

The alarm on the screen at the front of the cabin changed to a faster pattern of beeps and a higher pitch, as the directional readouts now showed the two fighters had changed course and were now headed directly for them.

"We're humped, people. Hostiles on intercept course. Time to contact: two minutes," came the Colonel's voice, still completely calm.

"Is this ship armed?" Kat asked.

"There are defense cannons on the top and bottom hull, but they're designed to take out ground troops and atmospheric craft. They'll be hard-pressed to do much damage against something armored for space travel like a fighter."

"So, do we abort and head back to the St. Pantaleon? Surely they won't have enough fuel left to follow us."

"Abort?!" Suri looked amazed at the suggestion. "Didn't you get the briefing? There is no abort protocol on this mission. We just improvise."

The ship lurched to port, violently tossing Kat around in her restraints causing her to hit her helmet on the cabin wall next to her, then she felt acceleration press her back into her seat. Out of the porthole next to her, she could they were diving even closer to the rocky, lava-spattered surface. Around the cabin, the rest of the unit, even Suri, sat passively in their seats, watching the monitor in front of them as surface features and the horizon spun madly outside the windows.

There were a series of loud "whump" noises, which she recognized as the two cannons firing at their pursuers. Then followed a louder explosion from above the ceiling in the galley area which she determined was a hit by one of the fighters. She had no idea how the others could be so passive and was amazed that she'd managed to keep from shrieking or panicking. Instead, she had managed to almost successfully subdue her shock and surprise, relegating it to a series of whipping head turns and wide-eyed stares. The former, at least, she could explain away as "constantly making sure no one required medical attention;" the latter, she hoped they would forgive her for. It was her first space battle, after all, and she thought she was handling it well, all things considered.



The ship rolled to port, then starboard once again and the "whumps" continued at a regular rate. This was a good sign, she decided. Suddenly, the engines rose in pitch and she found herself pressed back in her seat under the force of approximately three G's for what seemed like an eternity, when at once an explosion shook the entire craft, the engines suddenly dropped in pitch, sputtering as they did so, and Emerens' calm voice came over the com once more.

"All hands, brace for emergency landing."

Kat looked around the cabin. Everyone had gone pale as they saw the rocky surface of the moon coming closer and closer outside. Some looked at each other in amazement. Others closed their eyes as their heads sank. Next to her, she was certain she'd seen Suri cross herself before she looked up at the ceiling and began mumbling a prayer. Whatever the rest were doing, none were bracing. In fact, between the shoulder harnesses and the constraining armor most people had already donned, there was no way to brace for anything. All one could do was sit in their seat and accept whatever fate was coming for them.

The last thing she thought before impact was that she should have been terrified, but she decided she was relieved to see that, finally, everyone else was.

## Appendix

### About the Author

Darrin Snider is an award-winning Internet radio and podcast host, cloud engineer, analytics wizard, mannequin wrangler, recovering software developer, and resident expert on the Indianapolis local music scene. His hobbies include baseball, strategy gaming, the occasional RPG, voraciously reading everything in sight, DX-ing exotic radio streams around the world, quantum physics, day trading, comic books, old-time radio, the technological singularity, biking, cooking/baking, wuxia/chop-socky flicks, cyber/technoculture, imported teas, transhumanism, dead programming languages, and speed-writing first drafts of novels (mostly to get the NaNoWriMo certificates) which he locks away as part of some grand retirement scheme should he live that long.



### Afterword

These first three chapters of the "latest (not final) draft" are offered free of charge. If you enjoyed them, drop me a line, and I'll add you to a list to receive a copy of the final book and possibly some other goodies along the way. If you're a publisher, potential alpha reader, or bookworm like me that doesn't care if it's a bad draft, and you would like to see the full outline or other existing parts of this novel as a prelude to helping edit or publish it, I can probably make that happen too.

### Links

[darrin@lungbarrow.com](mailto:darrin@lungbarrow.com)  
[www.lungbarrow.com/writing](http://www.lungbarrow.com/writing)  
[twitter.com/indypodcaster](https://twitter.com/indypodcaster)  
[nanowrimo.org/participants/djaysnider](http://nanowrimo.org/participants/djaysnider)  
[linkedin.com/in/djaysnider](https://linkedin.com/in/djaysnider)

### Bibliography of Unfinished Works by the Author

#### Comedy

[The Pessimist Caper](#)  
[The Pessimist Design](#)  
[The Pessimist Refrain](#)  
[The Pessimist Hero](#)  
[The Pessimist Game](#)

#### Science Fiction

[The Halferne Perfidy](#)  
[The Halferne Incubus](#)  
[The Halferne Deception](#)  
[The Halferne Expedition](#)  
[The Halferne Imprecation](#)  
[The Halferne Bodhis](#)  
[The Malyon Gambit](#)

#### Nonfiction

[Woke Up Covered in Bitches Again: Observations of an Internet Disc Jockey](#)  
[Jazzoize: A Life, Culinary, and Software Development Methodology](#)