

## Orion Hunted

by Jourdan Cameron

"Prime boiler output's looking a little funny today," nervously barked Sir-Lieutenant Mont Troy. He was dressed in the traditional blue sailor's uniform, his white cap a funny relic of a bygone era. A badge on his lapel- a little gold dog- signified his rank as a Sirius Lieutenant.

For the most part, he kept his eyes on the glowing slate of plastic in his hand. He peeked up from it once or twice- the Captain hadn't turned away from the ship's wheel. "Can we have a shippie run down for a look at it?"

"Very well, see to it."

"Yes Captain!" The Sir-Lieutenant half-ran, half-marched from the room.

The Captain sighed with relief as the heavy, copper-decorated door slid shut with a loud *woosh*. She was sick of the sheepish Sir-Lieutenants and the skittish Nymph Cadets. She never imagined it'd happen, but she was getting sick of her *job*. She ran her fingers across the glass surface of the ship's wheel- the screen was framed by wood; the computer beneath it served as the ship's automated navigational system. In case of emergency, however, the ship's wheel could be used to control the engines- though it took a fair amount of physical strength.

"September Four, Two-Thousand, Two Hundred, Fourteen, Captain Diana Side," spoke the Captain into her wheel. "Sir-Lieutenant Troy reports that the output of the prime boiler is, apparently, *looking a little funny*. I have assigned him, on his own recommendation, to have a midshipman see to it. Nothing further to report." The Captain lay her hand flat on the middle of the screen.

"Encrypted entry. Foxtrot Tango Lima." She quickly looked behind her- the room was empty. "The crew is getting on my nerves. Just because I fought in the war- just because I fought in the big, fat, Last War- doesn't mean I'm going to cut them open with the photon scalpel in the medlab. I'd just like to get to know my own crew- not that it really matters, anyway. They're all just here for show. The ships of the 7th Exodus Fleet are mostly a show- everything's cared for by the ship computers and micro-repair drones. When Troy gets down there he's going to tell some subservient of his to press a button to get the drones to run a diagnostic and fix whatever's making the output run *funny*. Encrypt end, Romeo Papa Golf." She took her hand off of the wheel, and the screen turned into a plain sheet of glass framed by wood.

She took a deep breath and sat back- the Captain's seat was at least comfortable. She ran her long, thin fingers through her straw-red hair as she looked over the room. The place was in order, as she preferred. She stood up and ran her fingers along the cool metal walls, which were painted a soft cream color. The advantage, she supposed, of having EMP-resistant steam engines in outer space was that the ship's interior would be modeled after the most elegant spaces of the nineteenth century. As she walked along the wall, she glanced through the porthole at the far side of the ship- she could see but a few stars.

She stopped at the round window, running a few slim fingers along the copper edge of porthole window, then looked down at the glowing buttons and switches of the control panel that sat beneath the porthole. The array of controls glowed blue- training colors. In a few minutes, the boring, Sir-Lieutenants and midshipmen would be on deck, and Captain Side would be in charge of babysitting them. They were preparing for the terrible situations that would never happen.

She sat back in her chair and waited.

Well before she was Captain of the I.S.S. *Orion*, she was Sirius Lieutenant Diana Side of the *Atalanta*. The ship was far larger than the *Orion*, and the time was much darker. It was the time of the war- The Last War. Though the *Atalanta* was a steamer, it looked nothing like the *Orion*; it was, in her eyes, an ugly old thing. On the *Atalanta* there was no gilded trim high up on the dull charcoal-colored walls, or copper designs etched on the heavy gun-gray doors that slid open and shut at worrisome speeds. It was built without windows- windows were a liability in case of attack. An outfit of flat-lensed cameras placed at strategic locations were the eyes of the ship- its other senses came from the lateral line, a sensor array that ran the length of the ship.

The Captain thought back to one assault on the *Atalanta*- it was much like the others. The boilers were running at maximum capacity- a dangerous course of action, as the enemy was gaining space on the *Atalanta*- if they got in range, they'd fire their microwave weapons and blow the boilers.

"Focus fire on the lateral line!" Then Sir-Lieutenant Side had barked orders to a row of subordinates controlling the ship's guns at the stern. She'd been newly-promoted; battle-tested and true, but hardly trusted. Obedience to her was a formality. Her men followed her orders, albeit halfheartedly.

"I don't see the point," grunted one of the grunts. "We should keep aiming at the cannon, like we always have."

"You blithering idiot! They can't chase what they can't see!" The dissident bristled at his superior's reprimand, but followed her orders.

Side's clever tactic paid off. The hunk of metal was as good as blind as it came into range and prepared to fire its weapons. Lateral line gone, its crew were dependent on dead reckoning and the feeds from its few cameras. The *Atalanta* banked sharply starboard as the enemy ship fired its microwave cannons into the void of space, well away from overheated boilers.

The upper-gun decks on board *Atalanta* then unleashed a barrage of piercing bullets and deadly radiation on the now-prone enemy ship. In a matter of moments, the ship was little more than a rapidly expanding cloud of steam and scrap metal.

"*That was a good day in a bad war*," thought Captain Side. Indeed it was- her strategy of aiming first at the lateral line became the standard procedure for destroying the enemy- at least until they caught on. She was pulled through the ranks swiftly, in part for her cunning, in part for her

fame; though she took the lead in several critical battles, Diana Side spent much of the war being transferred from ship to ship, raising morale.

By the war's end, her uniform sagged with the weight of medals and honors that she had earned for her courage and the lives she saved and the- happy as she was to help put an end to the war, she didn't really care much for the burden of honor thrust upon her. She'd have preferred to disappear. In the postbellum years, she found a small measure of peace in an adopted son and a new job prospect- Captain of the *Orion* as part of the 7th Exodus Fleet.

"One day," she thought to herself, "I'll have to tell me story."

The door slid open, and a group of sharp-dressed Sir-Lieutenants filed in, stood in line at the nearest wall, and raised their hands to their foreheads in salute.

"We greet you, oh Captain!"

"I greet you, my fellow patriots," she replied with a half-hearted salute. Thus marked the end of the greeting ceremony.

"Captain, there was a situation in the prime boiler at zero six-hundred hours," piped a blonde Sir-Lieutenant. "Output on the prime boiler was slightly reduced. At zero six fifteen, Midshipman Sharp saw to it and dispatched the diagnostic drones, and at zero six eighteen, it was determined that the reduction in output was due to minor structural damage to the external part of the boiler, likely caused by diminutive stellar debris. At zero six twenty, the diagnostic drones repaired the damage done. Nothing further to report, Captain."

"Very well, Lieutenant Taur. To your stations."

The Captain sat idly at her seat as her subordinates took up their positions, sitting at all sides of the room, poking at the array of glowing screens and control panels before them.

"Remember when we were new, Captain? You had to guide us through the interface like children," laughed one of the Sir-Lieutenants.

"I remember, Darcy," she replied indolently.

"Yeah, those were the days. Hey, which one are we doing today? I think we should repeat the pirate one, since Maria- excuse me, *Lieutenant Taur*- didn't do very well on it."

"Sure," she sighed. "Pirates again." With a wave, the wheel before her glowed alive. "Training, standard, pirate attack," she barked.

"That voice recognition tech still needs to be ordered around, eh?"

"You hear all week, Darcy?"

"All week, Ted."

The Captain sat back- she'd not have to do anything as the simulator began. She shut her eyes, imagining herself sitting in the overstuffed red chair- the one in her quarters with the velvet upholstery and reclining back. She hoped to be in it by the day's end, telling to her son some tale of the war with a few adjustments made.

The expense of the last war wasn't only measured in raw resources and reformable interstellar

land- there was a cost to children whose parents went off to fight. Mothers and fathers, too often, would die aboard the same ship.

Besides little Dmitry, she had nothing to look forward to at the end of the day.

"Captain? Did you mean to switch us green? I didn't think you'd trust Darcy with actual control of the ship."

Captain Side snapped to attention and looked at the wheel sitting before her.

"Conditions normal, nothing to report. Darcy, what are the sensors reporting?"

"I'm switched green too," he said, his little brown eyes scanning the screen before him, "but I'm just getting the usual readings for the pirate simulation."

The Captain gritted her teeth. "That's not the simulation." She shut her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and continued. "You've been trained for this, you know what to do. James, get a full-fire order to the engine room, and tell the gun deck to get warmed. Darcy, keep an eye on their proximity. Taur, please- you know what to do."

In grim silence, the crew followed the Captain's orders.

"Captain," reported Darcy, "the unknown is gaining speed rapidly- it seems on course for a collision!"

"Tell me when it's in EMP range!"

"Captain, as per the Merope Convention there *is no* EMP aboard this ship! We've only got ballistics!"

"Force of habit," muttered Captain Side- the Merope Convention outlawed all worthwhile weapons- the ones that shut down life support systems and blew boilers to escape velocities. She was certain that the Merope Convention's restrictions would be forgotten by the next conflict.

"They'll soon be in range for the chem-rockets," she sighed. The pirates, of course, had no sense of decency- they'd likely disregard the Merope Convention with the same sort of impunity.

"Captain, they've not made any course corrections, they're still heading for a collision!"

"Taur, can you pull us into a balloon?"

"Aye, Captain!"

"James, relay to all aboard that we're ballooning!"

Midshipman Ted James jammed a finger into a button, and shouted. "Evasive balloon forthcoming- thirty seconds! All to safety positions! Hold fast!"

"Darcy, is their course unadjusted?"

"Aye Captain! They're bound to hit us in under a minute!"

"Taur, how soon to balloon?"

"Fifteen seconds!"

The Captain braced herself against her seat, clinging fast to the slender black armrests.

"Five!"

She clenched her jaw.

"Four!"

She clung harder.

"Three!"

She glanced at the wheel, which now glowed red with words of warning.

"Two!"

She remembered, for a moment, the Last War.

"One!"

She realized that her son was alone in his quarters.

"Balloon!"

With a sickening lurch, the *Orion* wrenched its mass through the blackness of space. Great force was exerted upon the Captain- she was bound to her seat, eyes shut, teeth gritted, unable to move or breathe or think clearly.

Still, one overwhelming urge rose above it all, not clearly defined in anything but one word: Dmitry. As the *Orion* leveled off, the crew gasped- with hardly a moment to catch their breaths, they desperately worked their instruments.

"James, any report from the engine room?"

"No problems with that balloon Captain."

"Darcy, proximity?"

"They've adjusted their course," babbled Darcy rapidly, "and they're heading straight for us!"

"James, are the chem-rockets loaded?"

"Aye Captain, the gun deck just reported back! They're loaded and ready to fire!"

"They're two minutes away!" Darcy was shrieking.

"James, give the fire order in thirty seconds!"

"Affirmative."

"Captain, should we get the lifeboats ready?"

Captain Side frowned in contemplation. The telltale glow escape ship engines at the underside of the *Orion* could tip the pirates off that they had plans to escape- on the other hand, what sort of pirates rode around in such valuable-looking ships, only to use them as battering rams? If their goal was not theft, but destruction, would the lifeboats be in danger?

"Darcy! Are we in range for a visual?"

"Aye!"

The cream-coloured walls were suddenly darkened, pitching the room into blackness. Only the instrument panels and control consoles continued to glow.

"I thought we had a visual?"

"I, um," Darcy was a bit stung by the Captain's reprimand. "There! You see it? There's the outline of the ship!" The Captain looked intently upon the wall- indeed, there was the shape of the ship, slender and dark against the void of space.

"Well done, Darcy. Are we in range?"

The *Orion* quaked mightily as a barrage of rockets exploded towards the dark hull. The crew stared at the dark shape projected onto the walls- it was unlike any ship they'd seen before.

"Captain," started Sir-Lieutenant Taur, "Does that ship *look* like a pirate ship?"

"It's... Awfully neat looking," replied the Captain. Indeed, it wasn't a mess of external pipes, or a patchwork of parts salvaged from wrecks. It was too good to be a pirate ship- and it was about to ram the *Orion*.

"*There it goes*," thought Captain Side, watching the image of the missiles that shot across the black space towards the inexorably advancing umbra that slid through the darkness. The incandescent white tails of the chemical rockets closed in on the elegant form that shot through the darkness, and then they were no more.

"Are we fighting a glutton? It ate the missiles!"

"Darcy *please*! Captain, your orders?"

Diana Side bit her lip. "Whoever they are, their intentions for the *Orion* are clear. Our mission, from the outset, was to get those aboard safely to their destination, and that will not happen unless we abandon ship. James, will you please make the announcement?"

"Aye, Captain," he replied gravely.

"It's gaining speed!" Darcy was shrieking again.

"To all aboard the *Orion*, Captain Side has issued an evacuation notice! Crew members on your deck will escort you to the nearest lifeboat. Please remain calm. Crew members, under no circumst-"

Midshipman Ted James never finished that sentence- or any other. A violent tremor ran through the ship, hurling loose objects and loosening those that once sat securely. Gone from the walls was the image of the dark form that slid through space- the walls were once again cream colored.

The crew at the bridge was, quite literally, floored by the collision.

Captain Side struggled to her feet, brown eyes wide with panic.

"I have to get to my boy! Taur, see to it that this deck is evacuated!" She bolted for the door, which had locked itself open upon the collision. Diana Side ran away from the wounded crew, past the panicked, breaking through the few orders that bind a Captain to a deck. Her boots pounded desperately towards the elevator at the far end of the hall, one thought on her mind.

The elevator, she was sure, wasn't moving quickly enough- the blinking status lights that lined its right wall seemed dimmer, and the light above her hardly glowed at all- was the flow of power being broken into? She cursed the designer whose idea it was to build a ship with no stairs- aboard the *Atalanta*, getting between decks was a matter of finding the nearest stairwell, which was never more than a few meters away. Aboard the *Orion*, however, elevators were scattered across the various decks. To the Captain, it seemed as though their locations were always changing.

"I'm going to run through medical," she thought aloud, her hasty breaths growing even, "get down to the engineering deck, and get my son into the next lifeboat out."

As the elevator neared its destination, the cacophony of a battle swelled beneath her. The floor jolted slightly beneath her as the elevator came to a stop. Her jaw clenched, her eyes focused, she was ready to bolt from the elevator.

With an excruciating slowness, the elevator doors choked and shuddered- the shining copper panels parted, slightly- enough to let the great and terrible noise of a battle fill the tiny space of the elevator, like icy black waters filling the hull of an old sailing ship. The shouts and the sounds of gunfire- the old ballistics- these chilled the Captain. A shiver ran down her spine. As Captain Side knew, it was one thing to be trained for battle, and quite another to have lived through war.

The doors opened a little more, and the Captain knew that mankind had been presumptuous in naming the Last War.

Through the elongated aperture, Captain Side caught a first glimpse of the foe- a dark gray and bipedal hulk- the thing- the suit? Its massive curved back rose from a comparatively short pair of legs. She imagined it to be a mechanical augmentation suit- though it was far larger than any she'd seen during the war. It was far too bulky, and the height seemed wrong for boarding ships.

The elevator doors had opened just enough for the Captain to slip her slender fingers between the doors and pull them asunder; she'd begun to formulate a plan.

With a hearty shove, the elevator doors gave Captain Side just enough room to squeeze through into the medical deck. She ran for cover behind the bulk of the various imaging devices in the medical deck- she was sufficiently hidden, she supposed, by the mess of copper pipes- though she couldn't quite crouch against the cream-coloured wall. From her new vantage point she analyzed the dark colossus- the more she stared at the thing, the less she understood where a man could be hidden.

*"They could be controlling it remotely,"* she thought to herself- in spite of its bulk, it seemed ill-shaped to carry the smallest soldier. A round blue window, like a giant eye, made up what could be considered the thing's "face"- at its sides were the barrels of what the Captain assumed to be weapons.

The pulse of gunshots slowed and went dead- she spotted her men running for the door at the far end of the long medical chamber. Unheeded came a flash of light and an awful whining noise, and one of the fleeing midshipmen now lay still on the dark metal floor of the medical deck.

Instinctively, Captain Side drew her sidearm from the holster at her hip. The ceremonial pistol, a thing inlaid with a gorgeous gold and copper and silver design- was a functional work of art. Swift as she had taken it out, Captain Side reholstered the gilded gun. She saw no need to give away her position; she'd likely not cause the monstrous machine any damage.

Another flash, another whine, another midshipman dead.

Cautiously, she pulled herself out from between the wall and the devices. The dark machine hadn't taken note of her, and quietly as she could manage, Captain Side hastened to the counter at the other side of the room. A variety of medical implements lay strewn about, having likely

escaped their cabinets during the ballooning. Her eyes burned and watered as she searched the surface of the table- acrid gas had begun to fill the room from some unseen burst pipe.

Among the items on the table was an x-ray gun- the crudest of all the fine medical machinery that saw little use outside of incredibly specific medical emergencies. The thing was a pistol built with no regard for aesthetics- its ugly blue plastic handle clashed terribly with its yellow-black striped barrel- but the thing *was* quite dangerous. In the wrong hands, on the wrong settings, it could- it *would*- cook the flesh of a patient.

Without a second thought, Captain Side bashed gun's handle against the counter. It split neatly in two, revealing a gray block of metal surrounded by a messy matrix of multicoloured wires. The Captain restrained a disgusted gasp as she turned the thing over in her hands, searching for the limiter- a flash, a whine- her time was limited.

Her shaking fingers began to tug on a pair of wires- the unfamiliar current of fear ran through her hands. Her hands, in their current state, would not pull the wires loose- hastily, she gripped the wires with her teeth and tugged them from their hold. Her twitching digits struggled to unite the bare copper leads.

"*If this works,*" she thought to herself, "*that thing will die. If not, I die.*" She found comfort in the ultimatum, having cut from her mind the factors that frightened her. There was no crew to worry about, no little boy to rescue, no ship to evacuate- she only faced living and dying, success and failure, one and zero.

She was Captain Side no longer. She was Diana la Matadora, and she strode silently to the target. Flash. Whine.

Wordless, she stood behind the black shell of the cyclops, raised the modified piece of medical equipment, and pulled the trigger.

The whine came, and the whine slowly died away in the air. The steady advance of the colossus had been halted. The silent weapon had done its job. Captain Side slipped around the bulk of the machine- its blue, blank face was black now, and a thin plume of smoke rose from some place unseen.

"This is not your ship," she muttered nonchalantly.

"Captain! What are you doing here? We need to get off the ship!" One of the midshipmen shrieked hysterically.

"Keep a cool head and get down to the command deck! We're evacuating the quarters down there."

"But Captain we already put out the order to evacuate, shouldn't-"

"You should be helping evacuate passengers," barked the Captain, jabbing a finger in the direction of the argumentative crewman, "not getting yourselves killed!"

With that, the lot of them ran off to the elevator at the far end of the medical deck.

Unlike the other elevator, this one was properly lit, and the group rushed in.

"Alright," started the Captain calmly, "does everybody remember the Phalanx Maneuver?" A worried murmur rose among the crew that stood crowded in the elevator. Finally, one of them



spoke up.

"Captain, we were supposed to learn that maneuver next month. We're hardly able to load our guns."

"*Malevolent creator*, you're medical staff, aren't you! Is anybody here a marine?"

As if to answer her question, the elevator came to an abrupt halt as the doors slid open and a pair of armored marines stood with their weapons trained on the elevator's passengers. Their copper-colored armor covered them from head to toe- it was a mess of tubes and pipes and parts that Captain Side couldn't quite identify, and had strange patches of colored glowing sections. In spite of its ridiculous appearance, it was quite functional- and surprisingly intimidating to gaze upon.

"Are there any brutal toasters among you?" The marine's voice came filtered through his metal mask- for some reason words had a warbling, musical quality, as though to spite his toughness.

"Not one," replied the Captain quickly as she exited the elevator and shoved past the marines.

"Has this place been evacuated?"

"In progress," he replied, "but there have been some fatalities."

"Who?"

The marine began to shake his helmeted head. "I cannot confirm their identities, I didn't look at their faces. Captain, I just got out of cryo."

Captain Side sighed, and quickly glanced around- besides the presence of the marines, one could hardly tell that a battle had taken place on this deck.

"What's your name, marine?"

"Corporal Oak."

"And yours?"

The other marine didn't respond.

"Did your friend take damage in cryo, Oak?"

"I don't think he'd be walking if that were the case, Captain," replied one of the crewmembers from the medical deck.

"Marin, respond to the Captain," said Oak.

The silent marine stood still, clutching his gun near his chest- the crew began to distance themselves from him, moving towards the door at the end of the corridor.

"Marin, can you hear what we're saying?" The marine's voice warbling voice remained resolute.

Marin, however, would not speak. Captain Side stood behind Oak and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Oak," she said gently, "I've seen this before. You should just leave him."

Oak shook the Captain's hand off- "I'm not leaving a man behind- that means Marin is coming with me."

"There's nothing you can do for him, and you're needed in case of another attack! Do you want more dead passengers?"

Oak ran forward and grabbed his friend- then, suddenly, let him go. With a clang, Marin fell to the ground, limbs loose and splayed apart. Oak stumbled backwards, and moved slowly away from the fallen marine.

"His arms," he started quietly, "his arms are like jelly."

Indeed, one of the fallen marine's limbs lay bent at the elbow- in the wrong direction.

"I've- I've never seen this before," stammered the Captain. "Let's go."

Without a word, Oak obeyed, and left his friend behind. Captain Side stayed to stare a moment longer. The marine didn't move. Reluctantly, she kicked his helmeted head, and with a sickening silence, his head was turned further than it ought have- with no resistance. The She shuddered, dreading the weapon that could so terribly ruin a man.

She left the ghastly thing behind and rejoined her crew, which was now walking through the open door at the end of the corridor into the large space of the engineering deck. The open area was rather sparse; the long line of disheveled passengers filing into the docking room looked small in the big empty place.

The Captain scanned the line- she recognized a couple of the passengers and ran up to them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Caracello, have you seen my son?"

The mustached man and his gray haired wife both shook their heads. "No," he replied grimly.

Captain Side took a few steps back- the thick line advanced, albeit slowly.

"Has anybody," she shouted, "seen my son? He's about this high," she gestured, putting a hand at the height of her thigh, "and he has dark hair. If anybody has seen-"

"Mommy!"

The patter of tiny feet stamping joyously against the metal floor came echoing through the space of the room as a little boy with dark hair bolted from behind the door where the ended. He ran up to his mother and clutched her leg.

"Dmitry, are you alright?" The little boy nodded- though his hair was a bit messy, he seemed otherwise unharmed. The Captain hefted Dmitry into her arms.

"Come on," she said gently, "we're getting on the next lifeboat out of here."

"Captain, there's something you need to see to," came a warbling voice.

"Yes, Oak?"

"I think some of the marines- on the command deck- I think they're still in cryo."

"Well, I suppose somebody should defrost them. Oak, the pass is "gold apple", I'm asking you to find the nearest terminal and give the command to wake the last squad. You're then free to board our boat."

The armored man saluted. "With all due respect, Captain, I'm staying here. If I'm able to reach then, I'll provide an assist fighting the toasters."

Captain Side nodded. "Very well. Zeus be with you," she chuckled.

"Aye, Captain. It's our turn now."