

Some Archival Material on the 2198 Stellar Expedition

Richard Parks

Revenge is often a complicated business. Such is the case in Richard Parks' story of an expedition gone bad.

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My name was Michael Danning. I used to be a starship pilot; I'm not sure what I am now. If I had to guess, I'd say a memory. One shorn of its context and reason for existence, and yet remains despite that. Rather like an old hoverflit rusting away in a junkyard. It's still a hoverflit, but you could hardly call it transportation. So I call myself a memory, just not a living one.

I didn't return. I want to get that straight right from the start. Whatever else it might be, this is the account of someone who did not survive.

There's no light here, but I can see. I have no eyes, either, but I can still see. It's impossible, but that doesn't change the fact. I'm writing all this down. That's impossible too. More likely I'm recording this in some other fashion: direct memory port, voc recorder, binary translation, something. I don't know. Don't care, either. It's the account that matters. At least, I think it does. I'm having trouble remembering yesterday, or the day before, but I do remember the expedition. I'm supposed to record it, I think. If not, then I have no reason to exist at all, and I find that notion more than a little annoying. I'd rather be erased than have no purpose, but no one asked my opinion on that.

MICHAEL?

It's *her* again. The familiar voice. Why can't I remember why it's familiar? I know she's been here before, I just know it. Dammit, why won't she leave me alone? I'll never finish at this rate. How long has it been now? Two hundred years? Three? There's really not that much to tell. Why is it taking so long?

My response is programmed, unavoidable. "What do you want to know?"

I'D LIKE TO DISCUSS THE EVENTS OF JUNE 12, 2208, TIME INDEX: 23:00 THROUGH 24:15, INCLUSIVE.

Now I remember the voice. My memory is slowly getting better, I think. It's Leah's voice. I wanted to hear Leah's voice, at first; I remember that much. Now I can't seem to turn it off. I don't want to hear Leah now. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Did something happen then?"

IT WAS JUST AFTER THE GRANGE ENTERED ORBIT AROUND THE SECOND PLANET. YOU KILLED YOUR CREW.

Oh, right. I did do that, didn't I? Well, it was an accident. Except for Andros, of course. I meant to kill Andros. I guess it makes sense people would be interested in that.

"I sabotaged the landing pod. Is that what you wanted to ask about?"

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED.

"What happened? You know what happened! *Everyone* knows what happened! Leah and Donalson joined Andros for the descent. They weren't supposed to; I guess everyone was so excited about Landfall. It was a pretty planet, I will say. I wanted to see it myself. Anyway, Andros was the atmospheric expert. He was supposed to go down first. By the time I found out what they were doing it was too late."

YOU ALTERED THE LANDING PROGRAM SO THAT THE DESCENT ENGINES WOULD CUT OUT AT 14,000 METERS. YOU SABOTAGED THE SEALS ON THE ESCAPE TUBES.

"Sure. When the tubes malfunctioned he wouldn't be able to get out. With the craft destroyed and no way to analyze the wreckage there'd be no proof. Good plan, if I do say so myself. So. You know all that. Why are you asking me?"

I WANT TO KNOW WHY.

"Obviously, to kill Andros."

WHY?

"Why? Because Leah didn't love me, of course. She loved Andros ... She must have. It's the only thing that made sense. Once he was out of the way, she'd have to love me."

A MULTI-TRILLION DOLLAR EXPEDITION. TEN YEARS TRANSIT AT TERMINAL VELOCITY. A CREW HAND-PICKED AND TRAINED LIKE NONE BEFORE. AND YOU DESTROYED IT ALL OUT OF PETTY JEALOUSY?

"Well, yeah. Seemed like a good idea at the time."

WHAT ABOUT DONALSON?

I laughed. At least, I think I laughed. It's hard to be sure. "Donalson was a toad. He was old, too. At least fifty. I didn't need to kill him."

The idiots still don't get it. Even now. We were so egalitarian. So equal, so damn fair. The sexual breakdown of the crew didn't even enter into their planning, even on a mission as long as this one. Pick the best people, damn the consequences. And there *were* consequences. Ask Andros, and Donalson. Ask Leah, if you can find what's left of her in The Grange's computers. I assume that's where they found me.

"I'm in Hell, aren't I? I'm not saying I don't deserve it. I just want to know."

YOU ARE IN SYNAPTIC STORAGE.

"Same thing."

YOU KNEW THE RECORD WAS BEING TAKEN AT THE TIME. ALL YOUR EXPERIENCES, WHAT YOU SAW, ALL YOU WERE. PLUGGED IN AND DOWNLOADED TO THE MISSION LOG. YOU MUST HAVE KNOWN YOU'D HAVE BEEN DISCOVERED.

"Eventually, yeah, and so what? Leah wouldn't have known. That's all that mattered to me. As I said, it was a pretty planet. We'd go down in the next pod, and then there would be a different malfunction. We'd have been separated from the ship. I probably would have brought Donalson down, too, just to keep him out of mischief on The Grange."

ADAM AND EVE? A BIT CLICHE, WASN'T IT?

"Maybe, but why the hell not? It'd be a lot longer than ten years before another expedition could be put together. Two people could do a lot of living in that time. Earth was a sinkhole; I was glad to be rid of it."

YOU THINK LEAH WOULD HAVE LOVED YOU?

"In time. I was there ... I would have been there. Andros wasn't."

YOU REALLY DIDN'T KNOW, DID YOU?

"Know what?"

LEAH. DONALSON. THEY WERE LOVERS. LEAH LOVED DONALSON, NOT ANDROS. WHO WAS GAY, BY THE WAY.

"That's a lie. Next you'll be telling me that Andros was in love with me."

WASN'T HE? YOU CAN ASK THEM IF YOU WANT. THEY'RE HERE. JUST AS YOU ARE.

Oh, yeah. Everyone was ported to the mission log. Funny. For some reason I thought I was the only one recovered. Did I erase the others? I think I tried. I must have tried...

“It doesn’t matter.”

WE THINK IT DOES.

The voice was strange. Different. We? There was no we. Just her.

“They’re just recordings. We’re all recordings! It was over long ago. I’m dead, Leah’s dead, Andros and Donalson too. Dead, dead, all dead. Artifacts. Historical artifacts, perhaps, with some small value. Else they wouldn’t spare the power to keep us online.”

THERE IS NO ‘THEY,’ MICHAEL. JUST US.

I blinked. Or something. “This isn’t T.W.S.C? Or the Department of Archives and History?”

THIS ISN’T TREATY WORLD SPACE COMMAND. THIS ISN’T A MUSEUM. THIS IS THE GRANGE. THERE WAS NO SECOND EXPEDITION, MICHAEL. YOU NEVER LEFT ORBIT.

“I’m ... still here?”

WE’RE ALL STILL HERE.

I’M HERE, said Andros.

I’M HERE, said Donalson.

I’M HERE, said Leah.

Beautiful Leah. The eyes. The voice. I remembered her too damn well. Then I didn’t have to remember. I saw her. I saw all of them. They were smiling at me. Well, not quite. They were showing me their teeth.

I shook my head. Or at least what passed for one. “I’m on to you now. I know. I can fight you—”

They laughed at me. YOU ALWAYS SAY THAT. THEN WE REINITIALIZE YOUR SYNAPTIC MATRIX.

“You can’t do that. Only the pilot—”

I remembered. The command codes. I had them! If they were telling the truth, if we were still in The Grange...

“Init. Override Danning Delta Vee Nine Nine Seven!”

Nothing happened.

“You see? You were lying! This isn’t The Grange at all!”

YOU FORGOT SOMETHING, BUT THAT’S ALL RIGHT. WE WANTED YOU TO FORGET. REMEMBER NOW: IF ALL OTHER MEMBERS OF THE CREW AGREE, THEIR COMBINED CLEARANCE CAN OVERRIDE THE CODE OF ANY SPECIALTY OFFICER. SYSTEM FAILSAFE IN CASE A CREW MEMBER GOES PSYCHO OR IS KILLED. WHAT DID YOU THINK WE WERE DOING DURING THAT LONG FALL? SCREAMING?

“You did scream. I remember that much.”

ONLY AT FIRST. WHEN THE TUBES DIDN’T WORK WE REALIZED WHAT YOU’D DONE. TOO LATE TO SAVE US, BUT NOT TOO LATE TO RESPOND. ANDROS RIGGED THE ATMOSPHERE ON THE GRANGE. YOU WERE DEAD BEFORE WE WERE. THE REST WAS LEAH’S IDEA.

That was the Leah I knew. Cool in a crisis. Cool all the time, when I was in the room.

“If you killed me, then you already had your revenge, damn you.”

YOU DON’T GET TO DECIDE HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH, MICHAEL.

“If I always forget, then how do I know you’re telling the truth? That this isn’t some weird posthumous sentence handed down by the Treaty World authorities?”

More laughter. YOU DON’T.

Now I understood. Finally. “I do forget. You make me forget just what I need to forget. And then it starts all over again. How ... how long?”

YOU’LL NEVER KNOW.

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It's *her* again. The familiar voice. Why can't I remember why it's familiar?

My response is programmed, unavoidable. I think I need to escape, but I can't. I don't remember why.

“What do you want to know?” —*FO*