

A Monster Among Monsters

by Michael A. Stackpole

She raised her chin, not without effort, and looked at the Quay across the chessboard, using the one eye she had left. "You should have let me die."

The Quay, for the barest of moments, became still enough that she could have imagined it to be a statue of some nightmare creature, great and hulking, with spikes all over the dark exoskeleton, one broken horn and a chipped tusk, both decorated with beaten bronze rings. His eyes — she assumed it was male — glowed red and she could feel wisps of infernal heat coming off him.

His head barely moved and she got no sense he was looking at her. "You wish you were dead. This is why I do not let you die."

Tiandre Sulson looked up from the chessboard and smiled at her navigator and gunner. "Give it up, Quick. You can think and think, but it's mate in four moves."

J. T. "Quick" Hamilton shook his ebon head, the ready room's muted light glowing gold from flesh. "I really can't see that, Captain, but being as how you're the one who taught me this damned game, I guess you're right." His right hand hovered over the king, and for a second she thought he was going to flick a finger and knock it over. Then a white grin split his face, and he pushed his rook forward. "But, then again, if I was a quitter, I wouldn't be your backseat in that T4, would I?"

"Oh, Quick, you should know better than to invite a beating." She cocked her head and affected an "I'm just a cute blonde" expression. Both of them, being pilots, were smaller than average, though proportionally developed and on the stronger side of lean. Quick still had twenty kilos on her and did make her look small by comparison, but size didn't count for much when flicking hot light from the cockpit of an attack fighter. The idea of her inflicting a beating on him sounded ridiculous, but the resignation in his expression made it quite clear that he knew what was coming and that it would hurt a bunch.

Lights dimmed in the iCom *Hawking's* ready room as the cruiser's alert klaxon started blaring. Tiandre's heart started pumping as she jumped up and headed toward the hatch and down the companionway to the fighter launch bay. As she ran toward her Type IV fighter, a flight mechanic tossed her a green and white helmet with her name on it. She pulled it snug on her head and ran a hand around her throat making sure it sealed with her flight suit, then darted up a short ladder and popped into the fighter's front seat.

Even before she donned her gloves and fixed her restraining belts across her chest and lap, she plugged her flight suit and helmet into the comm console. Not only would it allow her to hear the others in Inca Squadron, but the suit would let flight controllers monitor her heart rate, blood pressure, and any of a billion other little bits of data about her. Once she'd even punched the data flow to an auxiliary monitor, expecting to see her pulse and pressure sky-high, but both were abnormally low.

The flight-doctor told her that was good. "Isn't but one in a thousand reacts to stress the way you do, Sully. They're the ones who survive."

A cacophony of voices burst into her helmet as the other pilots reported in. Their data and call signs appeared on her secondary monitor off to the left, and everyone was coming up green and good except for Inca 7. "Inca Lead here, what's the problem, Rake?"

"I am negative for chatlink with my port missiles. The LongBows will be dumb."

Quick settled into the seat above and behind her and the ship's canopy slowly slid down. As he did his work, her ship checked in green all the way around. All six of the missiles had a datalink, and power was flowing to the chin laser and the two heavy laser cannons in the pods outboard of the missile bays.

She had to make a decision fast. "Rake, slip from launch order and do a hard system reset. If it doesn't come up, you sit this one out."

"Lead, it's not like we're defenseless."

"If I was worried about defense, none of us would be going out. We *do* the damage, not take it, remember? You have your orders."

"I copy, lead, pulling from launch sequence."

Taking the throttle in her right hand, she thumbed the grav projectors up to ten percent of power. Her left hand eased the throttle forward and her T4 rocked against the forward port launcher. A heavy-duty grav projector in the launcher would shoot her ship out into space as soon as the combat flight controllers had clearance from the bridge to start launch operations.

She punched her radio over to the command frequency. "Inca Squadron ready for action. We might be down one."

"Copy, Inca Lead."

Since before she could remember, Sully had wanted to be a fighter pilot in service to Earth. Her father had been one and had died before she was born. The fact that her stepfather had been a jerk helped make her real father that much more of a hero, and she knew that now. That realization hadn't dampened her desire to be a pilot however — nor had it made her stepfather seem any better in her eyes.

She'd flown combat missions before and her squadron had been refitted after the fighting around Phobos. Earther forces had recently taken the Jovian asteroid Hektor and the Incas were being sent out to replace another squadron that had been chewed up in fighting with the Mavericks. As near as she knew, they'd still been six hours from Hektor, so their being scrambled early came as a surprise.

"Inca lead, we have anomalous readings from an asteroid about seven kilometers out and up from the starboard bow. We need you to take a closer look. There are Mav elements in the area, so be careful."

"Got it. Tinmen possible out there. Just recon, or do we light them up?"

"Rules of engagement are Case Five."

She smiled. "Copy, control, switching to tactical." She keyed the radio to the squadron's tactical frequency as the targets coordinates flashed into her secondary screen and Quick's acknowledgment made the numbers glow gold.

"Incas, we're running recon on a target. Coordinates squirting now. Probably Tinmen. We're doing in Case Five, so smoke 'em when you see 'em."

"Let's go melt some Mavs."

"Can the chatter, Highnote. Form up on me one klick out."

The launch button flashed green on her console. She mumbled a brief prayer to St. Michael and crossed herself, then hammered a fist on the button. She felt a short, sharp shock as the grav generator punched her attack fighter down off of the launcher. Lights flashed past, then her T4 shot out on green flame jets.

She hit the right rudder pedal and vector jets slung the fighter's tail around to starboard. She watched as the rest of her squadron sped from the cruiser. The T4s, all sleek and gently curved, with a cockpit canopy that matched the faceplate of her helmet, emerged from the ship one after another, got clear of the launch vector, then reformed. The ships matched up in pairs, save for Inca 8. Stone brought his ship into formation with 9 and 10.

Sully tugged the throttle back to two-thirds and brought the ship around on the target vector. Jupiter, huge and striated, with countless small storms creating circular eddies in the clouds below, reflected sunlight into the slender rings orbiting it. She kept her hand steady on the stick, having to fight the gas giant's gravitational tug. Asteroids that massed more than her T4 had long since been dragged from orbit to plunge into the planet's depths, and she had no desire to follow them.

Sending some Mavs down there, on the other hand... She shook her head. She'd never liked the Reds on Mars, but she could understand their rebellion. The Mavericks, however, had played both Earthers and Gongen against each other, and then had just appropriated the Outer Rim for their own. Sully didn't like being manipulated — in fact, she hated it — and she could feel steel fingers all over events that led to the battle of Phobos.

Well, kids, it's payback time. Payback is a bitch, and so am I. Sully flipped the comm link to internal. "You feed me vectors, I'll get you on the kills."

"Roger that, Captain. Just as always." Quick laughed easily. "We'll be turning them Mavs into slag-hags."

She nodded and glanced at the primary monitor. "Time to target, fifteen seconds." She opened the link to the squadron again with the flick of a finger. "Stone, split your half of the squadron off and hold back. Give us twenty seconds, then come in hot if we get a reaction. Bravo and Charlie flights on me."

Acknowledgements flooded her head, but she paid no more than cursory attention to them. Jerking the stick to the right, she brought the ship over and down in a barrel roll, then nudged the throttle up and came in hot over the target. She swooped down toward the Jovian side, then started to come up and back in a loop to continue around the sun side, which is when all hell broke loose.

Behind her, a bolt of red light shot up from the asteroid's surface and slammed into Inca 5. The gout of red energy engulfed the ship, then it exploded in a roiling golden ball that eclipsed the sun, then faded almost immediately. Two other fiery jets lanced into space, but missed their targets.

"Five is gone, Cap. He followed your flight pattern perfectly."

She snarled. "Evasive maneuvers. Stone, what is it?"

"Lead, it's a hive. You have scabbers everywhere. Four Hecks lifting. We're on them."

Scabbers? What in hell are they doing here?

As if he could read her mind, Quick offered a comment. "They were probably just taking pictures."

"Or scavenging the Mav survivors we thought we were going to flame." Sully shook her head, trying to clear it of extraneous thought. She hit the command frequency, then kicked her ship into a roll and a looping dive to make another run at the asteroid.

"*Hawking*, this is Inca Lead. We have a Quay hive here. We have four Hecks lifting. We are engaging. Full data feeds now."

Quick sounded doubtful. "Asteroid belt, they'll be getting frags."

"Better them than us getting fragged."

The asteroid filled her vision. The small, kidney-shaped lump of black rock hadn't seemed remarkable, but coming in again she could see a dozen tunnel mouths, some small and others large enough to serve as hangars for the Quay's Hekaton fighters. The Quay had clearly established the base some time ago, probably as a forward position to monitor the Earther-Maverick fighting, as Quick had suggested. They'd covered the tunnel mouths with what the pilots called scabs, so on the first run, things looked normal.

They aren't normal any more.

Something was moving down there and she figured they were Quay actually on the asteroid's surface. Before she could say anything, Quick growled.

"I see 'em. Locked. Firing."

Two LongBow missiles streaked from her ship and corkscrewed down toward the surface. Visual feeds filled her secondary monitor. Time to target seconds scrolled down and, at the last second before impact she thought she caught a glance of a Quay wearing a very surprised look on his stony face. The expression, and the Quay, evaporated as golden fire blossomed on impact.

Several more red energy lances flamed into space, emerging from the mouths of hellish tunnels. Sully rolled her T4, came back around starboard and set up for another run. "Need to take those fire tubes out. They keep shooting, they're going to get lucky."

"Roger. A few more seconds. There, firing solutions for four, then we're out of slugs and have to use heavy light."

"Lead, break port, you have a Heck coming up at you."

Without conscious thought, Sully rolled the T4 and dove. The Hekaton shot up past her, looking pretty much like an orange seed, having that teardrop shape with the point stabbing forward and red fire jetting

from the bottom. She yanked back on the stick, trying to come up and around to get on its tail, but it accelerated away from her.

That was the thing about Hecks. They had all the fine maneuverability of a rock in freefall, but they were great with straight-line speed. The one she was chasing snapped open its flight wings and the secondary engines ignited. They'd be going for the *Hawking* and if they got close enough, the wings would close, the Heck would spin and literally drill itself into the ship. The Heck's crew of four would emerge and start killing, and Quays could do a lot of that, even after ramming a capital ship.

And they take plenty of killing themselves.

But those Hecks would never make it to the *Hawking*. Stone and the other five Incas were already maneuvering to stop them. The T4's heavy lasers could drill through the armor, eventually, and a LongBow or two slamming into a Heck's propulsion array tended to stop them fast. She'd even heard of a disabled Heck's crew emerging from their ship in full vacuum, gesturing defiantly at the pilots to come back and finish the job.

Time to finish this job.

Sully looped the T4, hit some rudder to side-skid away from a laser tunnel, then twisted down for a tight run over the surface. There wasn't enough of the asteroid for it to take more than a couple of heartbeats, and she marked the time by launch pings as Quick unloaded their missiles.

At that range, the time to target could be measured in nanoseconds. Four missiles flashed out then dove into dark tunnels. The light from primary and secondary explosions lit the asteroid's surface. Sully pulled back on the stick, rising above the lip of a crater, then looped and rolled to make a quick damage assessment pass. As the T4 began to level out, she caught sight of two more explosions as Inca 2 made its own pass.

"Eight to lead. The Hecks are done."

"Great, Stone. Combat orbit as we clean up here."

Flights Bravo and Charlie each began their runs. Missiles launched and lasers blazed. That much of things Sully Sulson remembered clearly. There had been a lot of explosions. One of the missiles had even missed its target but, by chance, had blasted through a scab. That began a series of staccato explosions that silently flashed across the landscape, like the sparking sputter of an old fuse.

She remembered thinking that it was getting terribly close to her line of flight. . .

The explosion beneath her T4 was neither terribly large nor powerful, but it did manage to eject a lot of debris into space. One piece of it — rather small to be sure, barely a finger in length and about that big around, punched a hole through the T4's starboard engine housing. It ruptured a fuel cell and breached the ignition chamber before fragmenting and continuing its journey through the ship.

One small piece of it, deflected by engine shielding as it exited a second before all the fuel ignited, pierced the cockpit. It blew through John Thomas "Quick" Hamilton's back, angling up, shredding both lungs and his heart before exiting to crack the cockpit canopy.

While it was true that the first of the fire entered through that hole, that was not the reason fire filled the cockpit. The meager shielding would not have stopped it in any event, but since it utilized the hole, it

had a curious effect. The fire instantly incinerated Quick's body and then gnawed the hole wider and wider, preparatory to sawing the ship in half.

Cockpit sensors marked the increase in heat. The ship's computer, in its last act before it was reduced to a puddle of silicon, triggered the cockpit ejection mechanism. Quick's seat did not respond, already consumed by the fire, but explosive charges shattered the canopy and boosted Sully Sulson from the dying T4.

Unfortunately for her — and she felt grateful for her amnesia on this aspect of the incident — the fire had also ejected back out of the ship through the debris' entry hole. The T4 had rolled, so by the time the ship spit her out, her ejection seat was traveling on a path that roughly paralleled the asteroid's surface.

Roughly is a relative term, and appropriate, since the pitted surface was decidedly rough. She lost her left arm and shattered her left leg when the chair clipped an outcropping. The chair tumbled from there and the rock shard that took her right eye lodged solidly enough in her helmet to prevent too much atmosphere leakage.

Somehow Quay found her, determined she still lived, and decided not to kill her. They brought her with them as they abandoned the asteroid. As best they could — or as much as they deemed it necessary — they put her back together.

The Quay nudged a Bishop straight forward and studied the board. "I watch. I learn. I have you to learn from. How you think. How you fight. In space, in this game."

"I know." Sully Sulson picked up a rook, jumped it over two pawns on a long diagonal, and set it down near the Quay's king. She picked up the two pawns she'd killed. "Two kills, that gives the rook a field-effect. Checkmate. I win."

The Quay's head came up. "For now. But what I learn will let us win."

"I know." Sully reset the pieces. "Ready to play again?"