A THOUSAND YEARS

Descent: FreeSpaceby Clayton Emery

"Shivans! Class-II! Pair at nine o'clock!"

"Roger! I got the far one!"

Wrenching the joystick, stamping the right rudder, the pilot sideslipped her Hercules fighter until it stood on its tail for a second, long enough for the screen's green gunsight to center on a Shivan fighter wicked as a silver knifeblade. Atsuko triggered her laser banks and saw metal boil on the fighter's belly. The enemy ship flipped into a wingover and dropped, but she'd planned to overtake it with a barrelroll anyway. Yanking the stick to her gut tightened her loop. Stars whirled by in a dizzy blur, then she released the joystick for just a second. The fighter bobbed and waggled as the computer autolevelled, and the pilot found she'd guessed right.

The escaping Shivan lay dead-on.

Atsuko triggered a second recessed button, and twin Disruptor cannons scorched black space. The Shivan knife-ship shuddered, kicked as one or both engines stalled --

-- but the momentum of Atsuko's barrelroll looped her far afield, so her quarry was lost to sight. With freespace as a battlefield, it was almost impossible to stick with an enemy. The wounded ship would implode, she guessed, but Shivan technology was a mystery. Still, she was an ace a dozen times over, as was everyone in her squadron. They had to be to survive.

"Computer, rejoin the wing." Atsuko released the joystick, jabbed her console to widen its angle. No rest: a pair of top-heavy Shivan bombers soared down a 140 bearing. Her wingman called a visual confirm and recommended a split. Seizing the joystick, Atsuko barked, "Roger! I'll dust your ass!"

There.

Spiralling in came two spidery Shivan fighters that also split formation. Atsuko cut her partner's trail to attack the uppermost ship. Her wingman was a GTF Apollo with half its paint scorched off. The Laramite pilot snaprolled to avoid an oncoming stream of purple lightning, then leveled to unleash a sizzling MX-50 missile. The semi-smart bomb backtracked the Shivan lightning stream, aiming infrared sensors at the hot gunport, but another burst of lightning spiked the missile's electronics so it curlicued out of sight. By then the wingman had pounced on the spider-ship's rear. The next MX-50 shot straight up an exhaust pipe. The spider-ship's back end blew out, then the entire ship ruptured in midair. The golden flash didn't even leave smoke.

Atsuko caught the picture on the fly, because the other spider-ship bored straight at her like a bowling ball. Sniffing, she counter-matched its path, zooming toward a collision, then goosed her rear vertical thrusters. Her ship tilted onto its nose. As the enemy rushed onto her viewscreen, she led it for just a second, then triggered her disruptor cannons to blast the cockpit where the shields were weakest. As the hatch disintegrated, she got the barest

glimpse of an angular alien body like a broken-fingered fist... then his ordnance erupted in purple fury and the ship exploded in fragments. Atsuko hooted, "YES!"

"Red Flight, regroup on me." The voice of "Butterfly" Butterfield. "No enemies within six klicks. Take five, then we'll redeploy."

"Computer, throttle back and reform." Atsuko let go her joystick and slumped in her seat. With a hands-on/hands-off configuration, the computer took over whenever the pilot released the joystick. Handy if the pilot became disabled, or dead. Grabbing the stick returned full flight capability. The human pilot stole a minute to sip water from a hose. But even resting, she watched the sky with one eye and read her cockpit and HUD displays with the other.

The power plant hummed in overdrive to resupply the defenses, the starboard engine lugging but within acceptable limits. Shield and Weapon Energy Statuses glowed gold along three-quarters of the bar: a timer showed they'd be fully charged in minutes. The blue concentric rings of shielding around her ship looked solid as angel wings. Her armament was reassuring: twin banks of six ML-16 ceramic-argon lasers; two GTW-41 gatling-gas Disruptor cannons; and in her secondary payload, a big surprise for some big enemy: six GTM-3 Tsunami intel-track bombs. "Antimatter that mattered," the armorers joked.

LDF-E44, nicknamed CHERRY BLOSSOM, was an antique refitted GTF Hercules, a two-man (one-woman) Heavy Assault Fighter-Bomber. At the ship's heart sat its weakest component, a skin sack of guts, blood, and bones that was Atsuko "Rammer" Toranaga, female, Asian descent, shavetail second lieutenant in the Laramis Defense Force. And while the ship was running at ninety-percent capacity, its pilot thumped her forehead to stay awake, feeling as if she'd been mauled by an ice-bear. Her eyes were grainy from lack of sleep, her hands trembly from stimulants, her back and butt and thighs achey from tension and exertion over too many twenty-hour days. Even her ship felt heavy and slow, as if the bomb-bay were stuffed with lead and pig iron.

Red Flight reformed behind Colonel "Butterfly" Butterfield's big Ulysses, CITY OF NEW ORLEANS. Atsuko's wing had two coffee-grinder Apollos, an overengined Valyrie that skittered all over the sky, and Atsuko's Hercules. She tapped her Ship's Status screen; it flickered to show Fleet Status. Silver chips converged towards the deployment point near their home, Laramis Prime. Red Flight, Green, Blue, and Gold. Such was the Laramis Defense Force, a floating junkyard dubbed "The Flying Tigers" by a squadron history buff who was now dead, as were too many good people. The Tigers had spent *days* fighting friend and foe. Though her brain was beat, Atsuko tried to sort out the jumble of recent events..

The Laramis solar system was the ass-end of Terran space, a research facility where not much happened and hotshot pilots blasted asteroids for combat training. Then one dark day, the Shivans jumped out of subspace, and the pilots had plenty of real-live targets.

Not long after, the GTA jumped in to save the day. Two Terran heavy cruisers, JUSTICE and RETRIBUTION, and a skyfull of fighter/bomber-escorts turned Laramis's system into a freefall war zone. Naturally, the mothers from the "mother planet" (snotty as Vasudans) had first demanded the Laramis Defense Force supersede itself to the GTA. Laramis said no. The GTA then demanded the LDF disband and surrender all vehicles, and that Laramis Prime power down its weaponry! While the Terran Allied Command banged heads with Laramite's Parliament, the LDF's commander-in-chief, Admiral Carla American Horse, told them ALL to torque off and mobilized every ship that would fly. (GTA now stood for "Get Torqued, Asshole!") Ignoring the GTA armada, the Flying Tigers went to work pot-shotting

Shivans...

"Red Flight, tune in." Butterfly's voice crackled over the comm unit as they approached the deploy point. Instinctively Atsuko grabbed her joystick.

"Tigers, this is Admiral American Horse. Listen up." Cool raspy tones, always calm. "CivCom's sent a coded message: coded so GTA can't intercept. We're to axe the two GTA cruisers. That's right: the *TERRAN* cruisers. GTA insists on containing the Shivans right here because our jump node opens a back door straight to Earth. The GTA cruisers hug the jump point, but more Shivans are hopping in minute by minute. Something's going to pop soon. We all know the LDF doesn't have the ordnance to stop the Shivs or to slam the jump node shut. So, at this moment, Laramite combat engineers have sneaked aboard JUSTICE and RETRIBUTION to plant jet-axe charges -- we hope. If we implode the cruisers and nav buoys, we implode the jump node. Terra will be safe and we'll be called traitors, but that's the luck of the draw. Our upcoming mission is to distract the Shivans AND the GTA until the cruisers blow. Flight commanders, download attack patterns from the LTC. The password is `Phoenix'. Stick with the plan. If any pilot deviates from the flight path, *I personally* will shoot you down. Good luck. American Horse Out."

"You heard the boss. One tough lady," came Butterfly's laconic tones. "Stand by for ADT transmission."

"Whew! Might as well declare war on earth!" Atsuko muttered as orders scrolled down her screen. "Bad enough to fight Shivans. But sinking cruisers? Impossible!"

Still... impossible odds and futile battles resonated in Atsuko's blood, called up programs from her DNA. In the biggest of Earth's ancient wars, her ancestors had thrown tiny fighters against aircraft carriers and battleships. Some of Atsuko's great-many-times uncles and cousins had become kamikazes, the "Divine Wind" that blew against the enemy and flamed-out bravely screaming "BANZAI!" so their empire might last "A thousand years!"

And today, at the far fringes of space, two great empires clashed, and another young Toranaga flew into battle --

But Atsuko was doping off as the attack got underway. Maintaining position in her air wing, CHERRY BLOSSOM rocketed towards a black sky stippled with thousands of silver-metal chips, each one a Shivan fighter or bomber. Beyond them hung the two Terran cruisers, large as floating cities, surrounded by the cloud of the GTA armada, all guarding the eight navigation buoys that focused the vital jump node to Earth. In the background spun Laramis II like a dirty iceball. The Shivan cruisers were temporarily out of sight in far orbit. Atsuko wondered if they were slingshotting around the planet to stab Laramis Prime in the back.

"Red Flight, engage enemy's left flank," commanded Butterfly. "Pilots fire as you bear."

Before she could draw breath, Atsuko's wing was swamped by sizzling spacecraft. A Shivan vessel like a flying beartrap rushed at her. Firelight winked along the ship's rim, and Atsuko instinctively goosed her topside thrusters to drop like a rock even as she triggered lasers. Her wing's Valkyrie zipped past to protect her, since Atsuko's Hercules carried the biggest bombload, an honor that made her wallow like a pregnant sow. Zinging past -- leaving Atsuko's left exposed -- the Valkyrie fired dual Banshee cannons that warped the beartrap's shields, then sent in four screaming Hornets smart enough to home on the damaged area. The Shivan's hull breeched --

-- and Atsuko was threatened on her exposed left side.

Roaring up from seven o'clock came a boxy-looking craft with flare-mouthed cannons lipped black. Two machete-like fighters escorted it, and one peeled off as if to spear CHERRY BLOSSOM. Lasers pinged her shields like hailstones while the enemy swooped in below eye level.

Atsuko had her own bag of tricks. In a squadron full of aces, her talents as a flyer were suspect, which is why she rated a slow bomber. She'd earned the nickname "Rammer" in flight school by bashing into targets before firing. The shields and hull of a Hercules could take it, she'd argued a thousand times over beers, and if you bowled the enemy backwards they couldn't shoot while you could. Her strategy earned high scores, and no skipper ever ordered her to switch tactics, so she carried on ramming. Only the mechanics grumbled about her warped shields and scuffed hulls.

Now "Rammer" didn't try to evade the rising machete, but hooked her nose to meet it. Too late, the enemy pilot climbed to avoid a collision. Atsuko's heavier Hercules slammed the machete at an angle and knocked it sprawling. From twenty meters Atsuko triggered her lasers. This close, the ML-16s vaporized the Shivan shields and destabilized the hull into red-gold slag. In her tiny cockpit Atsuko shouted, "Put THAT in a training video!"

Ahead loomed the big boxy ship with one escort on the far side. No help in sight. Atsuko shimmied right as yellow lights winked deep inside those flaremouth cannon barrels. Still crawfishing, she thumbed her joystick while shouting "Missiles away!" for computer backup.

Green gunsights winked as CHERRY BLOSSOM bucked. Two Tsunami missiles rocketed out of her pipes. Carrying their own on-board computers, the missiles corkscrewed in evasive paths, marking the Wild Black with vapor curls. The remaining machete-like escort banked and dipped to intercept a Tsunami, danced a brief dogfight, stalled for a better firing angle -- and caught the missile right in the cockpit. The eye-blistering white fire of matter-antimatter implosion momentarily bleached Atsuko's cockpit. Her light-compensating faceplate phased black lest she be blinded.

The second Tsunami missile slammed like a sentient cannonball down a flaring mouth on the Shivan box-ship. Atsuko temporarily let go the joystick to let the computer belly-out. From behind came another nova pulse of antimatter fury. The pilot chirped as her wingtips glowed white-hot in the aftermath of the explosion.

"Ooh! Computer, status."

"Stable. Paint blistered from undercarriage. Bomb-bay doors warped but operable."

"Whoa!" Atsuko whistled. Fusing the bombs into the hold would hurt! But she felt/heard the double WHINNNE-THUMP! as new missiles dropped into the pipes. Scanning the sky for bogies while she regrouped, the pilot flicked a glance at the console. And glanced again. That can't be right!

"That's impossible! Computer, we're hauling *Harbingers*?"

"Correct," chimed the machine. "GTM-N1 Harbinger missiles. A solid-core fusion bomb salted by three fission bombs. Propulsion is provided by a one-half size regulation GTA Class-II fighter-thruster --"

"I know all that!" Atsuko stabbed the display and gasped. Two more Harbingers hung ready to load behind the first two. "Damn! My armorer must've been half-asleep to rack those monsters! Or else I was too crispy to double-check her! Sheesh, now what?"

"Proceed with caution," advised the mechanical voice. "The 5000 megaton shockwave can fracture armor plate of Fenris- and Orion-Class cruisers --"

"Shut up." Atsuko chewed her lip. A single Harbinger missile could evaporate an airbase or a small city. If she touched off even one Harbinger, she'd need to skedaddle ten kilometers before it exploded! So *that* was why the ship felt so fragging heavy --

"Incoming Shivan attack vessel at four o'clock," chirped the computer.

"Mine!" Atsuko snaprolled to avoid a plunging silver arrow shot out of nowhere. Stamping both rudders, she spiral-climbed after the bandit, watched white pulses like plasma flash by, boosted the throttle and sideslipped, then strafed the arrow's underbelly with lasers. Burns stitched the enemy craft laterally, then it backflipped away. By the time Atsuko had swung around, it was gone, so she hurried to rejoin her wing. Plenty more Shivan fighters stippled the sky, and every one seemed aimed at CHERRY BLOSSOM.

The comm whistled the flagship's signal. "Warning. Countdown to Phoenix begins. 60. 59. 58..."

Dipping a wing, Atsuko located the two cruisers in the distance. Her wing flew well outside the blast range, so she concentrated on keeping her place and potshotting bad guys.

"... 5. 4. 3. 2 --"

From far off, Atsuko saw one of the two cruisers suddenly flush yellow at every port and gunbarrel. The great ship vomited fire like a volcano, burped again, and cracked its spine, burning in air spilled from her ruptured guts. Atsuko tried not think of the poor GTA bastards who took it in the neck, doublecrossed by two-timing politicians and rockheaded commanders.

"Flagship, we've got a situation." A strange voice broke radio silence. Crackling and sputtering caused by electromagnetic pulses masked her transmission, so she must be a long-range scout. "RETRIBUTION is still cooking full-bore."

"What? How can that be?" Atsuko joggled the joystick to copy as her wing banked. One cruiser was a flaming arrow being snuffed by vacuum. The other cruiser hung intact, steaming a slow spiral with all guns firing. "What the hell went wrong?"

"Tigers, redeploy!" The Admiral's voice, for once angry. "Assemble in two flights! Consult your screens!"

Shaking her head to ward off fatigue, Atsuko watched her screen spell out two new flights: Red and Blue. Green and Gold were history, she realized, because the Flying Tigers had suffered forty-three percent casualties. Atsuko hissed, "This is crazy! Even if we win, we lose! Every damn Laramite'll be dead! Whoa!"

Atsuko flinched as a snake-headed Medusa flashed up on her left, escorted by a trio of lightning-quick Athenas. The fuselage was painted with a spotted horse and the name LAKOTA NIGHTS. CHERRY BLOSSOM's computer intoned, "Left flank, flagship of Admiral American Horse."

The comm crackled in Atsuko's ear. "American Horse to Toranaga. Do you read?"

"I read, ma'am." Atsuko didn't watch the admiral's ship, but rather watched the sky for bandits.

"Change in plans. The jet-axes on RETRIBUTION failed to ignite. A scout reports Shivans -- not Terrans -- occupy the bridge. All we can guess is the Shivans sent their own sappers aboard and pulled our fuses. We've got to touch off that cruiser with hand-carried missiles."

"Hand -- carried?" Atsuko squeaked.

"Roger. My master computer shows four Harbinger missiles packed in your aft bomb-bay. Confirm."

"Confirmed, admiral, but it's a screw-up --"

"We'll take what luck we can get, lieutenant. Pick up your speed and prime all your projectiles. Red Flight'll sweep wide along 290 and pull up over the cruiser's midship gunwales. You target the conning tower with your Harbingers. The shields are weakest there. Blue Flight will clear your flight path."

"Target the -- Admiral, these are proximity missiles!"

"Affirmative." The cool voice could order soldiers to die, like it or not. "You drew the short straw. Prime, please."

Please commit suicide? Well, what the hell. More of her friends were dead than alive: it was simply her turn. And someone had to carry the payload to the enemy. Atsuko flicked switches with trembling fingers. "P-primed, ma'am."

"Follow my tail, pilot. We're going in. Good luck."

"Thank you, admiral." Formal as a funeral parlor. "You too."

As if soaring down a black tunnel, the new Red Flight slid across the sky. The Terran cruiser RETRIBUTION, long as a city, was etched black against snowy Laramis II. The moon Laramis Prime had orbitted into view, and in the far distance floated two -- no three! -- Shivan D-Class cruisers. Blocking the flight's path buzzed a swarm of silver Shivan destroyers, transports, convoy vessels, and fighters. Stationed back at the three-quarter mark of the flight, Atsuko's Hercules was ringed by flaming steel ships steered by vulnerable human beings. As the flight's speed increased and the silver web of enemies grew larger, the sky began to wink and sparkle. Not with starlight, but with munitions fire. Lights flashed like dawn until they were engulfed in hell.

Atsuko watched flight after flight peel away to attack or repulse the enemy. Many didn't return, knocked to splinters of flying metal. One of Admiral American Horse's Athena escorts exploded, so close pieces bounced off Atsuko's shields. Flying Tiger ships were pared from Atsuko's right flank, so she watched that side more than most. Those guards didn't return either, the flank destroyed. Would *anyone* survive this war to see victory?

A hunchbacked GTA Ulysses flicked by upside-down, a factory-new beauty without a scratch. What miracles Atsuko could have performed flying that ship! But the Terran pilot waffled, lost and confused. More Terrans flocked, unsure whether to attack Red Flight or escort it. Atsuko wondered what story the admiral was spinning to stall them. GTA couldn't know yet that the Tigers had croaked their first cruiser: so far they probably believed the Shivans had hit a soft spot, or else the ship imploded through internal mishap. *Frag the GTA*, Atsuko cursed. The Terrans would figure out the Laramites' master plan when their second cruiser novaed in their faces.

Atsuko watched in wonder as a triple-wing Shivan ship dropped almost onto her head, but it targeted the admiral's flagship. A side-mounted Flail cannon pulsed, hurling a cloud of

krypton-powered laser beams to push the enemy back. The Shivan answered with chained lightning that etched cracks in LAKOTA's hull. The tri-wing ignored its own wounds and actually accelerated into the snarling hellstorm. The Shivans formed suicide squads too, Atsuko marveled. She harried the enemy ship with laser bursts, as did other flyers, until the hull glowed cherry-red. Atsuko's thumb ached to unleash a Harbinger missile to save the admiral's ship, but she had the admiral's orders to save her firepower for the cruiser. The tri-wing surged closer to the flagship, and Atsuko had to cease firing. LAKOTA NIGHTS staggered.

The comm snarled, the admiral's voice. "Rammer -- Uh! -- Carry out -- the mission! Con-firm!"

"Confirmed, ma'am!" Atsuko's own voice cracked as tears ran into her oxygen mask.

Zigging and zagging to avoid the wobbling enemy craft, Atsuko watched from the corner of her eye as the painted horse burned: burning that hot in vacuum! Admiral American Horse's Medusa suddenly veered into the path of its nemesis like a kamikaze of old. The Shivans didn't dodge: probably the crew was already dead. Both ships exploded in a boiling fireball that shoved CHERRY BLOSSOM on like a giant hand.

Atsuko fired and fired again, almost blind with tears, and let the computer fire too. No need to conserve ammunition. Tapping the Ship's Status indicator showed her the Fleet Status. Maybe thirty Tiger ships were left in Red Flight, though several had dropped behind as their power plants failed. A quick wingover for visual confirmation showed her Red Flight had bored within spitting distance of RETRIBUTION. The city-sized cruiser suspended firing amidships for fear of hitting their own GTA guys. Atsuko wondered about the pause, until she realized the cruiser was so huge, the bridge could be overrun by Shivan assault squads before other sections even knew it... or maybe the Tigers' "secret plan" had been leaked so the Terran crew could abandon ship.

Atsuko hoped so.

A machete-ship crabbed past, spewing wreckage and Shivan bodies. A Synaptic bomb whistled by, close enough to touch. Ships came and went as if tossed by a whirlwind. Close by the cruiser were scattered red spinning cluster mines. Atsuko diverted two lasers and let the computer pop them.

The LOCK alarm by Atsuko's left hip suddenly flashed on, and she almost panicked. Instinct made her sideslip and then wingover to shake off whatever heat-seeking missile was chasing her vapor trail. She flicked her console to rear view, saw a silver streak, joggled the joystick to evade --

-- and saw a Ulysses stoop like a hawk to bump the missile with a wingtip. The missile erupted, and the Ulysses touched off in sympathetic vibration. As the ship ruptured, Atsuko read the name CITY OF NEW ORLEANS on the blistered hull. She whispered, "Thanks, Butterfly."

Now came Atsuko's turn.

Before her loomed the cruiser. All around her soared Shivans and too few Tigers.

"Afterburners ready!"

"Ready," replied the computer.

"Afterburners -- ON!"

Atsuko was slammed back into her seat as her Hercules was kicked in the tail. With all rockets firing, she zoomed away from her doomed escort and aimed her craft like an arrow for the RETRIBUTION's conning tower.

This was it, she thought. Her *final* descent.

Alone, Atsuko dived while the cruiser's conning tower grew in her screen. Her lasers and cannon are auto-firing, more for distraction than damage. She needed to concentrate to hit her target.

"Computer!" Atsuko barked. "Cut the Harbingers's fuses long but squeeze the range to minimum! Divert all power to front shields!"

"Harbinger charges delayed to fifteen seconds. Detonation interval reduced to fifty meters," confirmed the machine. "Full power to bow screens."

Atsuko felt the ship lurch, fishtail and headstall, as her shields blinked out at the stern and thickened before her bow. Down in the secondary bomb-bay, the dangerous Harbingers hummed alive, probably frying her auxiliary electronics. Yet this configuration should do the deed just dandy, she calculated. Harbingers alone might not penetrate the cruiser's defenses and armor. But a 146-ton starcraft tipped with twelve layers of shielding should smash like a fist through wet paper. Four missiles, delivered deep into the cruiser's guts, would deliver 20,000 megatons of atomic destruction.

And the pilot, sitting at the heart of the explosion, wouldn't feel a twinge.

Wrestling the joystick, Atsuko aimed straight for the glistening window on the bridge, where interior lights illuminated silhouettes crooked as a dog's leg. The vision was fuzzed by the heavy shielding, but she saw the evil armored faces of Shivans swivel towards her.

Atsuko screamed a battle cry that hadn't been heard for a thousand years. "BANNN-ZAIIII!"

She thumbed the joystick: once, twice. CHERRY BLOSSOM bucked and bucked again as the Harbingers fired two and two. Missiles drilled like lasers for the bridge window.

Atsuko clamped the joystick against her gut to hold her course, but the cruiser's massive shields, like multiple layers of splintering ice, sent her Hercules skidding and slipping in a dozen directions at once. Lacking the mammoth payload, with afterburners driving the stern to overtake the bow, the ship's nose dropped. Atsuko yanked upwards and CHERRY BLOSSOM took wing like a bird, flattening into a shallow arc. The pilot grit her teeth as armor plate and plexiglass cartwheeled across her screen. Her ship straightened, bored on

-- and rammed the cruiser's bridge.

Although Atsuko never saw it happen, the nose of the Hercules caromed off the bridge's brow like a cannonball. Despite safety harness, the pilot was flung forward hard enough to snap bones. Her crash helmet splintered gauges while her nose hammered her faceshield and spurted blood. The joystick busted ribs.

CHERRY BLOSSOM suffered worse. Far behind Atsuko's seat, the power plant blew as shields ruptured from feedback. Electronics sputtered and spat and burned and burned out. Hull plates sheared and rivets popped. Stubby wings crumpled and snapped off. The wreck pinwheeled across a backdrop of stars.

Dimly, despite the frantic spinning, Atsuko saw only that the cruiser sailed on, still fired all its

guns, still dealt death in all directions. She blacked out moments before a nuclear-powered star blossomed inside RETRIBUTION's bridge and the conning tower shattered like a volcano.

All Atsuko knew was she'd failed.

Failed her comrades, dead and alive, and failed herself.

Atsuko's loyal CHERRY BLOSSOM blacked out, electronics gone, life-support failing. The spinning shell of metal was dying in space, with its pilot dying within for lack of air...

* * *

Air puffed on Atsuko's eyelids, filled her nostrils, cooled the sweat on her brow. Prying open a swollen eye, she saw the word RESCUE swim past.

A GTA tech, a black man with merry blue eyes, snapped an oxygen mask over her face. A red cross burned bright on his white helmet. As Atsuko's vision cleared, she saw another medic rode a rescue boom that draped an oxygen tent over the shattered cockpit. A mechanical umbilical ran back to a GTA convoy ship, an old hammer-headed Chronos freighter refitted for rescue and repair. The second medic handed down instruments while the first leaned into CHERRY BLOSSOM's cramped cockpit.

"You okay?" He smiled and waved a hand. "How many fingers?"

"Uh. Thirty or -- forty. You must play -- a hell of a piano." Atsuko's lungs gurgled as she sucked oxygen, a wonderfully sweet "divine wind". With consciousness came curiosity. "Hey! Why am I alive? What happened?"

"Plenty. Hold still." The medic aimed a long-needled syringe and punched clean through her flightsuit into her skin. "When RETRIBUTION blew it fragged four of the nav buoys -- and blew you five klicks, practically into our laps. Our GTA guys from the west pole clobbered the other buoys. Yeah, we know you Tigers scuttled our cruisers: our CO explained the plan. I wish you locals had given us Terrans the full picture: we could'a worked together."

"We -- tried." Atsuko sipped air and let the tech work. Finally she could relax. "Your top brass -- wouldn't listen."

"They never do. But the ol' home planet is safe because the jump node is flooey. The down side is, you and us and a shitload o' Shivans are trapped in this system for good. But your second-in-command says there's plenty of other planets. We'll be okay. That's the news. Oh, and you're a hero."

"He -- ouch! -- ro?" A cracked rib squeaked in Atsuko's chest, but the medicine soothed her pain like cold fire.

"Yes, ma'am. Though us and your buddies might be the only ones who'll ever know."

"That's -- enough."

"That bombing run of yours was quite a sight." Plying a parachute knife, the medic cut loose her harness, then attached snaphooks from the rescue boom to her flightsuit. Gently Atsuko was plucked from her seat. She felt nothing, her head buzzing while the medic talked to keep her awake. "You knocked out an enemy cruiser single-handed."

"No. Not single-handed." Atsuko pictured all the good men and women who'd gotten killed

escorting her down to that cruiser. And all those ancient dead ancestors who'd given her life, and put her here today. "No, I was just the -- the point of the sword."

"Maybe," laughed the medic, "but they'll need to mint you some new kind of medal. Crunching a cruiser alone? No one's done that in -- a thousand years!"

The End.