**The farewell**

Captain Lowry was angry when he learnt that the owners had sold the *Saviour of the World* out from under him without informing him, and he spent the next two days stomping round finding fault with everyone and everything. He was even more angry when he learnt the ship had not actually been sold, but lost in a poker game to some over-privileged airhead playboy who knew nothing about the haulage business, and was *furious* to discover that two days later the over-privileged airhead playboy had lost the ship to a different over-privileged airhead playboy in another card game.

Captain Lowry was often angry. He had been angry when the *Saviour of the World* turned out to be the closest ship when the distress call of *The Triple Choice* came in and he was forced to divert to her. He had not been at all happy to find himself walking through a ship full of dead people slaughtered by pirates, with only the reassurance of some-one very far away that the killers were long gone. He had apparently also been of the opinion that the one living person on board – me – would not survive the transfer to his ship and it was probably best to let me die in peace in a comfortable bed on *The Triple Choice*. He eventually agreed that I could be taken to his ship, but had grumped about it for a full week. Nor was he happy when the police asked him to turn back on his time-sensitive trip just so I could be transferred to their own ship in order for them to find out first-hand what had happened on the doomed *Triple Choice*. He was marginally happier when the police, using other sources of intelligence – almost certainly a rival crime lord – first identified the attackers as subcontractors of the sector crime boss Milton Milton and then found out their current hideout. A bungled/sabotaged gun-battle left the whole attack crew dead, with the result that the police were much less interested in whatever I could tell them and much more invested in coming out of the impending enquiry still with a job, leaving Captain Lowry free to continue his trip and avoid the harsh time-penalties set out in his contract.

All this I heard about later from Megan, of course, as at the time I was not taking much notice of anything. I owed my life to her, as it had been she who had followed the trail of my blood down the corridor, over the corpse in the doorway and into the cabin where I had tried to administer first aid on myself. Lack of blood and anything other than water from the sink as sustenance had left me seriously weak. I remembered nothing of my transfer to the *Saviour*, and very little of the weeks when I lay on the laundry floor while she did her best to keep me alive with the meagre contents of the emergency medical case.

Megan was certainly more invested in me than the others. The third crew member, Grainger, had taken against me when the detour to *The Triple Choice* had cost her the early-arrival bonus she had been banking on. She told Megan she was going to demand that I pay it to her instead, until Megan said:

“She told me her name this morning.”

“Well, way-heigh and honey. Can I tell you just how uninterested I am in that?”

“You should be. Her name is Hazzelelponi, daughter of John.”

“What sort of stupid dratted name is that?”

“A Blood Family of Lamech sort of name.”

“You mean she’s a dratted *sicario*? We have a dratted assassin from those nutjob religious freaks on board our ship? She’s probably the dratted dratter one who killed every dratter on that ship!”

“Operatives of the Blood Family of Lamech would never work with criminals. They only take legitimate jobs with well-vetted, upstanding clients of proven probity. Oh, and the use of the pejorative term *sicario* is very offensive to them.”

This at least was Megan’s version of the conversation as reported to me. I did not voice my suspicion that it had possibly been ever so slightly edited, but whatever the truth of it Grainger never did get round to asking me to pay her bonus.

It was also Megan who was most concerned for me when we heard about the change of ownership. Three days after receiving the news of the sale Captain Lowry lost all interest in the *Saviour of the World* as he had been offered the command of another haulier at a better rate of pay. Megan was to go with him but Grainger had always had plans to take a working holiday on the planet TigerEye at journey’s end, and even without the benefit of the now non-existent bonus, she still intended to do so. This left only me.

“The thing is,” Megan said, when she had asked me to join her sitting at the dining room table when the Captain was safely elsewhere, “you are paperless.”

I was not technically paperless, as my ID card was somewhere on *The Triple Choice*, or wherever evidence from the ship had been taken, but I did not have anything physical to present to the police should they ask for it. I had had six months in which to get a replacement, but Captain Lowry had not been prepared to make any more detours on my behalf and by the time we got to anywhere that could supply me with a replacement it was too late. I was liable to fines for not having valid ID and the crew were in danger of even larger fines for transporting a stateless person. It had not mattered while I had been working on board the ship - I had simply not left the docks on the two stations we had visited - but now I was going to have to do something about it.

The voyage had come to an end, and now the crew was coming to an end. Perhaps it was a sign from God.

“We can smuggle you out of the docks easily enough,” Megan said. “But if you get picked up by the police at any time you will be in trouble.” She hesitated. “And us.”

“I would not betray you.”

“But your sort can’t lie, can they? I know you wouldn’t *want* to mention the *Saviour*, but …”

“I am allowed to say nothing,” I said. In fact I had discovered during training that there were many and various occasions when we had dispensation to lie, despite what had been drummed into us as children.

“I kinda know you’re not very keen to involve your family,” she said. “I’m not prying,” she added hastily. “I’ve just … noticed.” I had 37 full and half-brothers and sisters, most of whom I would be unable to recognise on sight. My mother and full siblings lived far away on New Hope IV, and my job was such I had not seen them for some years, and I had spoken to members of my close family exactly twice whilst on board the *Saviour*. “But I’m pretty sure your family would be able to help sort out the problem with your papers. You know, dealing with officials and everything. They must have experience of that sort of thing.” I nodded. They did indeed. “Only, if you didn’t want to ask them …” She slid a slip across the table to me, “… here’s the name and address of some lawyers who help stateless people.”

I was touched by her kindness. “Thank you.”

“But I’m sure your family will be really pleased to see you again,” she added, in case I was insulted, “and I’m sure they will be more than happy to help”. I had been working close person protection on *The Triple Choice*, and my client had died. I had conspicuously failed in my job, and my bosses in the security branch of the Family were not at all pleased with me. While my close family would have been happy to see me again in celebration of a promotion or the receipt of a praise-note from a Father impressed by my work, they would be mightily unhappy if my disgrace brought any unwelcome attention to them and affected their chances for employment, marriage or the right to have children.

“And of course, if you get off here, you are still a long way from home. Will your family be able to send you some money? I mean, I can give you a bit, of course, to tide you over, but …”

I shook my head. “You are very kind, but I will not need your money.”

She looked dubious. “You know you have to pay for accommodation, and food and everything on the station?”

I nodded.

“Of course you do,” she said, embarrassed.

Actually it was not something I had really considered. The Family had always taken care of such details.

“Well, anyway, I had another idea. Maybe you can stay on board the *Saviour*.”

My only experience of working a haulier had been the seven months I had been on aboard so far, and for much of that time I had been too weak to do much. Even now I was far from fit.

“Doing what?” I asked.

“Probably much the same as you are doing now.” I was general cook, cleaner and chief bottle-washer. “You still won’t be paid, I’m afraid.” As I worked for the Family business all my nominal salary went straight to central funds anyway. “And you’ll have to sleep in the laundry still.” It was better than some accommodation I had used. “We can get the skipper to write you a letter of introduction to the new captain. He works for a different company, not one I’ve heard of, but independent hauliers try to stick together, and he’d probably let you stay on for at least a couple of trips. And who knows, maybe they’ll even go to New Hope IV sometime, and you can get a free trip home.” She looked at me. “Do you want to see if the skipper is willing?”

So we went to Captain Lowry, and Megan explained her idea, and I only had to step just the slightest bit too close to him for him to instantly agree. He wrote out a note on his nexus, showed it to me to make sure I was happy with it, and I nodded even though he had spelt my name wrong because he was still my captain and I did not want to embarrass him in front of Megan. He transferred the note to a watermarked slip and handed it to me.

He was gone the next morning, and Megan left soon after. She had asked me on at least three different occasions to stay in contact with her. I had promised her I would the first time she requested it, and did not see why I had to repeat my promise multiple times: I had given her my word, and that should be enough. We had a farewell meal together in one of the dockside cafes, and then she, too, went off to join her new ship.

Grainger was the last to leave. I had seen the instructions left by Captain Lowry and knew we were supposed to leave the ship in a good state for the new owner, so I asked her if she had arranged for some-one to come and pick up all the junk that had accumulated in the hold. “It’s all sorted,” she said in a way that clearly meant she had not organised anything.

After Grainger departed I was left alone in the ship. It was the first time I had been alone in her, and, thinking about it, the first time I had been more than ten metres from fellow humans for at least six years. The ship seemed empty of people and full of unexplained noises and distant whispers, and I was glad that my work cleaning and tidying her as best as I could made enough noise to mask the stillness. The tired old ship did not look great at the end of the day’s work, and my injured arms ached abominably, but at least the new crew arriving in the morning would not be faced by a dirty ship. It was work Grainger should have done, but which had been omitted in favour of stealing anything that took her fancy that was not actually nailed down.

I ate in lonely state at the dining table, because it might be the only time I would ever be allowed to do so. I would be sleeping in a proper bed that night as well, although still in the sleeping bag as the linens that had survived Grainger were all now carefully washed, folded and put away on the proper shelves in the laundry.

I had just finished reading my daily Bible chapter and was just deciding whether to try scrubbing the dining room table down one more time in an attempt to make the stains look at least a little less noticeable when I heard some-one at the station-side entry. I checked on the camera and found it was Grainger standing there, with a couple of companions and a trolley.

“Why did you lock the door?” she asked, sounding put out, when I let her in.

“Basic security?” I suggested. She looked blank. “… Why have you come back?”

“I forgot a few things.”

“Yeah,” said the taller of her two companions, a man with dyed spiky black hair and a silver jacket, who stepped past Grainger and looked round with interest. “Don’t let us disturb you, darling. We won’t be long.”

I had seen nothing likely to belong to Grainger during my day of cleaning and tidying beyond one hair tie, and I doubted it needed three people to collect that. “What did you leave behind?” I asked her.

“Just … stuff.”

The other man, wearing a fringed tunic and yellow shoes, also squeezed past us, with an amused smirk on his face. “Yeah … stuff.”

The two men turned down the corridor that would take them to the bridge.

“Look, you just go and watch the vid in the lounge and we’ll be gone before you know it,” Grainger said, patting my arm. Hmm. Any fear of me she might have had seemed to have disappeared. Did she think the two men with her would be enough to protect her?

On the way to the stairs I paused at the corridor junction and checked on the two men, catching sight of them through the bridge doorway, inspecting a console. Well, this was interesting. I found I was humming to myself as I walked upstairs and into the kitchen. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed this sort of thing. I opened the top drawer and looked at the choice of knives available – none were razor sharp, but any of them would do – but then decided I was over-reacting: there were, after all, only three of them, and one of them was Grainger, whose idea of exercise was sitting in the gym eating gingernuts. I opened the second drawer down instead and rummaged through the assorted kitchen equipment kept there before deciding on the rolling pin.

I returned downstairs much quieter than I had gone up – I had long since learnt how to walk down the metal steps without the usual collection of creaks and squeaks – and peered cautiously round the corner. Grainger was not with her friends on the bridge, but had gone down the corridor in the other direction and had just unfolded a large collapsible box outside the open door to the tool-room.

I almost skipped down the corridor to the bridge, but thought perhaps it was not quite dignified enough.

Grainger’s friends had their heads close together as they worked out how the proximity unit was attached to the console and how they could detach it with minimum damage.

“Gentlemen,” I said from the doorway, keeping my hands safely out of sight behind my back. “I am afraid there has been a slight misunderstanding. Ms McCartney does not own anything on this ship, and you do not have permission to take anything away.”

Silver Jacket looked round to me. “Fuck off,” he said.

“You cannot take what does not belong to you.”

“Well, it all belongs to me now, doesn’t it?”

“No,” I said. “It really doesn’t.”

Silver Jacket sighed and moved away from the console. He came to stand close to use his height and size to intimidate me.

I grinned at him, and for a moment he looked startled, but only for an instant for I brought the rolling pin from behind my back and raised it up high above my head – I was doing my very best to telegraph the blow, but he was still shockingly slow – and he brought his right arm up to defend himself and I struck him hard across his forearm and heard the bone crack. A busted skull was just too much trouble all round but a broken arm would do nicely. He instinctively grabbed his injured arm with his other hand, so I gave him a second tap on his fingers – not enough to break them, but just enough for some bruises and another ripple of pain through his broken arm – and then I kicked him in the stomach to put him down. Thirty seconds, start to finish.

“Fuck,” said Yellow Shoes imaginatively and started round the console towards me, reaching into a pocket for a knife. I hit him on the side of his knee with the pin to get him on the floor and then smashed it down on his collar bone, since a broken collar bone kept most people compliant. Twenty seconds for him.

I hummed a few more lines of *The Lord Fights For My Soul* as I bounced down the corridor to Grainger who stood frozen, a bundle of tools in her hands ready to be put in the box.

“You are very naughty, Grainger,” I said. “You didn’t tell them who I was, did you?”

She just licked her lips nervously, so I twirled the rolling pin a few times. My training officers would disapprove of such showboating, but they were nowhere near and would never know.

“Are you going to put them back, then?” I asked, looking at the tools and she hastily returned to the tool-room and I heard the clatter as she threw them down on the work bench.

“Now, I could call the police and get you all arrested for attempted theft, but then you could counter that and get me arrested for being stateless, so how about we call this a draw, and go our separate ways? You and your friends leave the ship and I go back to the cleaning. You know, that thing you didn’t do before you left?”

She could still hear the sounds her unhappy companions through on the bridge were making and she nodded, trying out a placatory smile at the same time. She would have agreed to anything.

“Then I suggest you go and help them off the ship.” I stepped aside to let her get past. “… Oh, and Grainger? You see what I did to your friends when I was in a good mood, because I haven’t had a chance to play for months? If you try to cause trouble for me I’ll come after all of you and show you what I do when I’m in a bad mood.”

I watched them stumble their way off the ship, ashen-faced, holding their injured parts and avoiding eye contact. I waved at Grainger when she looked back before I shut and secured the lock.

And although I had been conscientiously keeping the last half-packet of jam-centred biscuits for the new crew, I thought, since I had just saved them both money and hassle, that it was just about legitimate for me claim one of them in reward. Or maybe even two.