

# Pirates Reprise

Helen B. Henderson

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## *Acknowledgements*

I gratefully recognize my final reader Karen, who might claim to be blind as a bat, but can see the clearest of all. And my husband, Tom, for his patience and support over the years.

## *Pirates Reprise*

First Officer Wes Roberts listened to six channels with one ear and a dozen more with the other. Although the launch progress was faultless, he kept his finger poised over the red abort button as he watched the battery of instrument lights cycle from yellow to green. At the zero mark, the space liner Halcyon wafted skyward on silent anti-gravity rays.

“All green and on the beam,” Roberts reported to the Halcyon’s captain, even though he knew Ed James had followed the launch’s progress.

“Very well, Mr. Roberts,” came back the acknowledgement. “Secure from launch station. Set the watch.”

“Aye, Captain,” Roberts replied.

Throughout the remainder of the duty, Roberts busied himself with the thousands of details that kept the mile-long craft traveling through the ether. He didn’t mind the volume of work his position required; only while on duty did the faces of his dead wife and daughter recede into the background.

“How’s things, Wes?” asked the communications officer, entering the bridge.

“Green across the board,” came back the traditional reply.

“It’s sure quiet down below. There isn’t even anyone to play Telgo with. Those marines keep to themselves.” Although no one could overhear the conversation, the comm officer still dropped his voice almost to a whisper. “Wes, just between us, what is a platoon of fleet space marines doing onboard a passenger liner?”

Running fingers through his jet-black curls, Roberts considered his answer. Although most of the Halcyon’s crew had just recently come aboard, he had worked with the comm officer before.

“Don’t know. I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough. I’m for the rack.”

A short time later in his quarters on the Halcyon’s outer ring, Roberts surrendered to the thrall of star song. While the rhythm of the universe and the kaleidoscope of infinitesimal specs of matter exploding along the Halcyon’s shields drove some men insane, it became the life beat to hardened space crews. Deep space crews became so attuned to the song of the ship’s drive they had difficulty sleeping when planet-bound.

Next day at shift change, the Halcyon’s captain called his senior officers to the wardroom. Taking his customary place, Roberts leaned against the wall beneath the framed hologram of the sleek sailing ship that was the Halcyon’s namesake.

“First off, let me introduce Commander Delrom,” Captain James began, after silencing the room with a stern glare. “I’m sure you’ve all heard the scuttlebutt about pirates and lost ships. And are wondering why we have a platoon of space marines onboard. Over the past three months, pirates attacked four passenger liners, murdering the crews and most of the passengers. Those that survived, usually the very young, just disappeared. Fleet assumes they were taken by the raiders.”

Before the stunned officers could digest the captain’s revelations, the marine commander stood up. His ax-and-anchor insignia glittered with each movement he made. “The Halcyon’s hold contains medical supplies critical for the Martian Colony to survive. The fleet admirals feel because of its new portal drive the Halcyon can hold its own against any ship in the ether. We have no firm intelligence the Halcyon is in danger; we’re just along as added insurance.”

With one ear attuned to the rest of the briefing, which covered the usual shakedown issues, Roberts evaluated his fellow officers. They're all good men, he thought. They'll stand true if the alarm goes up. So engrossed in his thoughts, he almost failed to catch the captain addressing him.

"Mr. Roberts, although experienced spacers, the marines still need to be certified. Coordinate with Commander Delrom and give them the standard deep space orientation." The briefing concluded, the officers left for their various assignments. Those going off duty headed to the mess for a meal or down to the recreation level. Seeing the captain signal him to stay behind, Roberts hung back and didn't join his fellow crewmen's retreat. James knew his first officer harbored strong feelings of loss over his family's deaths. Guilt compounded the emotions since the deaths occurred while Roberts was away on an extended reconnaissance patrol in the Centauri galaxy. Knowing how his friend would react, the senior officer carefully closed the door and triggered the room's shields before giving Roberts his new assignment. The precautions were justified as soon as Roberts requested permission to speak freely.

"Captain, I object. I am not a babysitter. She's already protected by marines. Why do I have to watch her when I'm off duty?" A vein throbbed in Roberts's neck as he fought to control his emotions.

"Krella is the daughter of the colony's governor. Although traveling in the company of the marines, she needs someone from the ship's crew to show her around and put her through the space certification. As first officer it's your duty to handle all training."

The captain waited for a few more seconds, before continuing. "We've already caught her trying to sneak onto the bridge. I want you to not only make it clear what areas are off-limits, but ensure she obeys the restrictions." Seeing the obstinate set of Roberts's face, James hardened his tone. "Are my orders clear, Mr. Roberts?"

"Yes, sir."

Striding quickly across the bridge to conceal his anger, Roberts headed down to the passenger level to meet his new charge. A few steps from the pneumatic lift, a slender figure slipped from the shadows.

Recognizing Krella from the hologram in the briefing file, Roberts slid his half-drawn weapon back into the holster.

"You're not supposed to be up here. Where is Yeoman Parker? She's supposed to be with you whenever you're out of your quarters." Unrepentant, the fifteen-year old glared at the older man. Something in his face suppressed her natural urge to challenge authority, changing her response from her usually retort.

"She was practicing zero-gee maneuvers with the troops. I slipped out."

"You need some zero-gee time for your suit certificate. Now's as good a time as any, we'll join Parker," Roberts said, gesturing the girl into the lift.

"What if I don't want a suit certificate?" the teen asked, her arrogance returning.

Temporarily at a loss, Roberts covered his consternation by securing the bridge hatch. When the lift door closed behind the pair, he still hadn't decided how to handle the precocious teen.

"Well?" Krella demanded with a toss of her red curls to remind Roberts of her presence.

Looking down, he tried to think of what he would do if Krella were his daughter. She needs a good smack on the bottom and a week without privileges, he thought. And as quickly realized he could do neither. With no quick solution to the troublesome teen, Robert rubbed

his hand on the back of his neck. I can handle anything a cadet or yeoman throws at me. Perplexed, his ruminations continued. I've never had problems with the Halcyon's young passengers. Then shaking his head he added, but this child...

Surprisingly, in the zero-gee gymnasium, Krella's obstinacy left as she obeyed every instruction he gave her. Maybe she's bored, Roberts thought as Krella's unrestrained laughter echoed throughout the large empty room as Parker swung her through the emergency rescue maneuvers.

"I'm on the bridge from 12:00 to 17:00 hours. I understand you have lessons to do?" Roberts asked the pair in front of him, noting only a few years in age separated the two girls. At her bodyguard's glare, Krella gave a sullen nod.

"Your lessons should take you most of that time. Why don't you join me at 17:30 for dinner? Afterwards we can start the ship orientation. Things should be relatively quiet then. We can go to the bridge and I'll introduce you to some of the crew." Seeing Krella's eyes light up at the mention of the bridge, Roberts knew his hunch on how to handle the young girl was right. As Krella headed down the corridor to her quarters, Roberts flashed the "stay close" signal to the yeoman. Startled at seeing a marine hand code, the yeoman flashed back her understanding before running to catch up with the striding teen.

Having arranged with the yeoman to keep Krella busy during his bridge duty, the teen's attitude became less truculent. The days passed and over the course of the next few weeks, Roberts's resentment at the special duty faded. He actually began to look forward to his sessions with the two young women.

The strident sound of emergency claxons ripped through the ether. Throughout the vessel crewman leaped into spacesuits and grabbed weapons before manning their battle stations. Despite the Halcyon's being a passenger liner, its captain had handpicked the crew for both their space and military experience. And they responded as the seasoned veterans they were.

In the bowels of the enormous vessel, the claxons disrupted a tour Roberts was giving his charges. With the first siren still echoing in his ears, Roberts dogged the hatch, opened the emergency locker, and leaped into an atmosphere suit. Checking the suit's instruments, he laid the helmet close at hand and turned to suit up Krella and Yeoman Parker. Hiding his surprise, Roberts nodded at seeing Parker already sealing her charge into a suit. Designed to fit the larger crewman, the bulky suit dwarfed Krella's slender frame. While Parker got into her own suit, Roberts adjusted Krella's to make the teen as comfortable as possible. Satisfied there was no immediate danger of decompression, he turned to a control panel set in the far wall.

As if a distant observer, the viewer displayed a Halcyon under siege. Like an old bull moose under attack by a pack of wolves, the ship darted here and there. Unable to use the power of the now-disabled portal drive, the ship's frantic maneuvers merely kept the numerous small pirate ships at bay. While the horrified trio watched, a brilliant beam leaped from one of the attacking vessels turning the Halcyon's shields a dark violet. Within the space of a breath, the beam punched through the weakening protection. As the light crept across the liner's stern, entire sections of the vessel vaporized.

His hands clenched in helpless frustration, Roberts watched as more beams flashed from the harassing vessels. With each attack the fire control officer shifted the ship's shields to protect the bridge and the portal drive.

A tinny voice issued from the wall speakers and echoed in the suit's smaller ones. "All hands, stand by to repel boarders. All hands, stand by to repel boarders."

Responding to the commands, the Halcyon's first officer grabbed an anti-personnel mine from the emergency locker. His handgun already buckled outside his spacesuit, he slung a pair of disruptor rifles over his shoulder. Completing his arsenal, Roberts stuck a space axe through a loop on his suit belt.

"Parker, rifle and handgun. Axe if you can handle one. Krella, can you handle a weapon?"

"Yes, sir." Her eyes wide, Krella swallowed before continuing. "Master rating with handgun and disruptor."

Roberts's eyes, now steel hard, pierced the teen before giving her permission to take a weapon. As he watched, she loaded the power cores, switched the control to burst mode, and slipped the safety on.

"Stay behind me and Parker. Don't fire unless either of us tells you to. Understood Krella?"

"Yes, sir," came the wavering reply.

Using his command codes, Roberts broke through the morass of communications to reach the Halcyon's captain. Roberts gave a sigh of relief as his friend's bass voice came through his suit speakers. "The marines will handle the pirates boarding through holds one, three, and five. Our crewmen have stopped the group attempting to break through the outer ring. Our biggest problem is the portal generator. We need it online. What's your status?"

As he reported his location, Roberts mentally plotted a route to the massive hold where the large generator and several smaller ones sat behind several layers of anti-radiation shields and fifty-foot-thick lead and gelbium shielding.

"You're the only one of the bridge crew with a chance to reach the generator. See what you can do. Chief Engineer Jones can talk you through whatever needs to be done. Internal sensors are down in your section. The pirates may have already breached." Then his expression forcedly neutral, the captain continued. "Wes, take your passengers with you. But the ship comes first."

"Krella, Parker." At the captain's address the two women moved into viewer range. "You heard my orders." The abrupt loss of the communications link cut off the chorus of, "Yes, sir."

"Let's move," Roberts ordered. "I'll take the lead, Krella in the middle. Parker, cover the rear. Helmets on, weapons charged."

The improvised troop moved out on a roundabout route to the generator room. From time to time, he signaled Parker who would seal a hatch or trigger a force field behind them. Without warning, the Halcyon's anti-gravity generator seized. Krella's scream from within a cloud of floating containers brought both Roberts and the yeoman to the terrified teen. Roberts realized Krella could never keep up with them. Bringing the floundering girl to the deck until her suit's magnetic soles caught, he hooked a long tow wire to her suit.

Beaming a metal grid into slag revealed a hidden tube.

"Don't worry about me, sir. I grew up in zero gravity," Parker offered at Robert's raised eyebrow. "Whatever pace you set, I'll be on your six."

A quick flick of a switch, and the magnetic soles disengaged. Traveling vertically through the ship's access tubes enabled the trio to move faster as well as avoid the bands of

pirates roaming the corridors. No longer did the marine and ex-marine have to help Krella maneuver the turns and twists in the corridors. They just towed the teen behind them.

Following the running battles in the rest of the ship on his comm, Roberts had advance warning when a pirate attack force entered the tube. Signaling the yeoman to take the lead, Roberts unclipped his suit and floated down a level. Hooking one leg around the ladder rung to anchor himself, he flipped his disruptor rifle to maximum power and minimum dispersal. Holding down the fire key, Roberts blanketed the dark space below him. Although no screams penetrated his helmet, from the amount of red mist splayed on the wall Roberts knew he'd critically wounded several pirates. A few swift kicks and he reached the waiting girls.

No longer secure in the access tubes, the first officer again sought the open corridors. This time, instead of just closing the hatches, Roberts played his handgun's beam about the hatch. Under the weapon's heat, the hatch and frame flowed together into a shimmering crimson wall. Their suit's magnetic soles now switched off, Roberts and Parker used the handrails to literally fly down the corridors towing the teen behind them. Growing accustomed to the lack of gravity, Krella soon caught the rhythm, swinging her arms and legs to help move her bulky suit around corners.

Outnumbered and outgunned, the trio slowly retreated before the invader's superior force. Hampering the pirates as much as she could, using space ax, handgun, and whatever she found in the storerooms they passed, the yeoman laid invisible trip wires, created dead falls, and jammed hatches.

"I welded the last few hatches, sir," Parker reported, catching up to Roberts and Krella in the generator room. "It will take even a semi-portable some time to burn through."

"Very well. Stand watch and let me know when they start burning through the hatch on corridor 14."

Alone with the frightened teen, Roberts focused on repairing the damaged drive. Deeper and deeper he probed into the massive engine before him. Even here in the bowels of the ship, he felt the savage attacks on the wounded vessel. A shudder rippled through the ship with each beam that penetrated the Halcyon's shields. And with every groan of stressed metal, the frightened Krella edged closer to Roberts.

"Bridge, put on Engineer Jones, security code delta gamma." Roberts commanded over the comm. At the connection, he reported what he'd found. "Jonesy, I found a burnt piece of wire on circuit niner niner five. It's pretty far in. Is there any way I can reach it besides straight down the channel?"

"Not without dismantling the entire assembly. If you can reach it, cut out the damaged area, strip in a thirty rod. We should get portal capability for a jump. Maybe even two."

Breaking the circuit, Roberts pulled the necessary items from the repair stores racked nearby. The taint of ionized particles and burnt insulation filling his nose, he wedged his body into the narrow channel. His fingers straining and stretched out as far as he could, the damaged part still evaded his grasp. Backing out of the engine, he scanned the room. None of the available tools reached far enough.

"Sir," Krella's quiet voice echoed in the cavernous room. "I'm the smallest one here. I can climb in further, maybe I can reach it."

About to protest because he knew the teen would have to take off her spacesuit and be vulnerable, Roberts gave a sigh. As he helped the girl out of the bulky gear, he gave her explicit details on what needed to be done.

“I did it,” Krella called. Then continued with a triumphant ring in her voice, “The two wires melted together. I bridged the gap with the rod. Just like you said.”

“Good girl,” Roberts said giving Krella’s arm a squeeze and wiping a smear of charcoal from the tip of her nose. “Back in your suit. Parker, helmets. The air is getting pretty foul in here and if the pirates break through, we’ll lose what little is left.” As if his words triggered a prophecy, the Halcyon shuddered as the pirates launched a new wave of attacks.

“Mr. Roberts,” Parker called, backing into the room. “They’ve almost burnt through the hatch on fourteen.”

Triggering his comm link, to Roberts surprise the captain answered the call. “I’ve been monitoring your frequency,” the captain explained before Roberts could question. “We’re going to fire the portal drive in five minutes so you need to be out and have the door closed by then. A squad of marines is at corridor nine and expects to reach you in four minutes. Can you hold out until then?”

“Guess we’ll have to, sir,” came the reply in Roberts’s cool tones. “Engine room out.”

Gathering an armful of tools and parts, Roberts led the two girls from the engine room. Putting Krella beneath a worktable, Roberts signaled Parker down the corridor to cover the approaches. Moving benches and chairs into an obstacle course, Roberts crouched behind the makeshift barricade. Fingers flying, parts melded with others until an ungainly mass of circuits and wires overflowed from a box.

“Parker, return,” Roberts commanded over the suit comm. “Shield going up in 10 seconds.” In response, the young marine leaped the barricade in a zero-gee maneuver that would have made a twentieth-century gymnast envious. As Roberts connected a power core into the homemade generator, a red light blinked intermittently before settling into a steady green as a shimmering force field appeared.

Severe rumbling from both inside and outside shook the small room where the trio waited, weapons at hand. Giving the marine a quick smile, and squeezing Krella’s arm, Roberts tried not to think of what would happen if the pirates overwhelmed their meager arsenal before the reinforcing marines arrived. Every time he looked at Krella’s frightened features, they transformed into those of his murdered daughter. And no matter how hard he suppressed it, Roberts kept imagining the fear his daughter felt when captured by the pirates.

One eye on the glowing red pinpoint in the middle of the hatch, Roberts shifted his suit view to the outside corridors. “Hang tough, girls. Reinforcements are on the way.”

The small viewer displayed the panicked retreat of the invaders before a squad of fully armored marines. While the pirates atmosphere suits might stand up to a disruptor rifle, nothing short of gelbium-reinforced shielding could stand up long against the power of a semi-portable. And no rational creature willingly faced a marine’s space ax, especially in zero gravity.

A low hum reverberated in the trio’s earphones. Placing a hand on the engine room wall, Roberts felt the faint vibration of the portal drive powering up. Before he could warn the girls, they all experienced the disorienting wrench of the shift from normal space to the portal channel. The sensation ended as abruptly as it began, accompanied by deafening cheering on all communications channels.

Trying to determine the reason, Roberts shifted his viewer from corridor to corridor, then to the Halcyon's outer rings. Tapping into a bridge command channel, he accessed the ship's exterior sensors. A shared link enabled the two girls to see the cause for the celebration. The Halcyon had emerged from the portal channel into the middle of a military fleet assembled to give the stricken liner an escort to the colony. Gone were the darting silver needles that had surrounded the Halcyon. Fleet super-maulers now englobed the liner.

Tears of joy ran down Krella's face as the tension of the last few hours took its toll. Exhibiting very un-marine like behavior, Yeoman Parker grabbed Krella and started dancing an intricate pattern within the narrow confines of the barricade. Finally, Roberts broke down and joined Parker in a resounding marine cheer.

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The framework supporting the damaged sections gave the Halcyon the appearance of a giant spider nesting amidst the tall towers of the spaceport. The sentries squatting on the beams looked like deadly flies waiting for the spider's return. A loud groan accompanied the lowering of the access ramp as Roberts and the Halcyon's chief engineer used force fields to finesse the twisted metal into some semblance of a walkway. Down the temporary path walked row and row of marines flanking the lift wagons bearing the precious cargo of medicines. Behind the transports, Krella and Yeoman Parker walked alongside the platoon's commander.

"Eye's left," issued the commander's low command as he passed Roberts. Surprised, Roberts right arm went up instinctively to return the commander's and Parker's salute. Before the weary first officer could recover from the unexpected tribute, Krella turned and ran back to him. Stretching to her full length, she placed a quick kiss on his cheek with a softly whispered, "Thank you," before running back to join her bodyguard.

Roberts's eyes blurred from unshed tears as he watched Krella march in lock step with the marines, her red curls turned into his daughter's black ones. Krella's whispered voice became that of his missing daughter.

Forcing his emotions back under control, Roberts contacted the bridge. "Captain, the marines have debarked and the cargo is securely underway to the medical facility. Should I release the men?" Receiving an affirmative, Roberts waited a second, then in his best parade field voice announced, "Shifts one, two, and three, released for shore leave. Report as ordered."

As if floodgates had been opened, a wave of men flowed down the ramp. Roberts waved to a man here and there to wish them a good time. The last of the crew disappearing into the growing crowd of welcomers, Roberts leaned against the side of the ship, his unfocused eyes seeing nothing but memories of his life before pirates took his family.

Long moments later, he sensed a man moving up behind him. "Captain, that offer of a home-cooked meal still open?"

Surprise flickered in the other man's eyes to be quickly suppressed. "Sure, Wes. Why don't you come over at 17:00 hours Halcyon time tomorrow?" Although Captain James had tried many times to get his first officer to join him for dinner, Roberts had always refused. With no sign of startlement in his voice at the unexpected request the captain added, "I'll tell Laurel to set an extra place. I know the kids will be happy to see their Uncle Wes. The relief shift has control of the bridge so I'm for home myself. James out."

At the appointed time, Roberts showed up at the quarters his friend shared with his family. Two steps into the door, a pair of three- and five-year-old boys and a toddling

eighteen-month-old girl assaulted their “Wunkle Wes.” Prepared to viciously control his emotions, Roberts realized with surprise that for the first time the cold blackness that had accompanied his prior encounters with children didn’t materialize.

A low growling caught James and his wife’s attention. Peeking through the door into the main room of their living quarters, they saw Roberts romping on the floor. As they watched, a game of tug of war turned into a wrestling match with the baby pulling the hair of everyone within reach.

“I don’t know what happened on this trip,” the watching woman said, leaning back into her husband’s arms. “But given a little more time, I think he’ll be all right.”

Planting a kiss on her forehead, James said, “It’s not total, but it’s a start.” With a pleased smile, he returned to watch the overwhelmed man.

As if aware of the scrutiny, Roberts stood up. Not about to be outdone by her older brothers, the baby grabbed Roberts’s belt. Laughing at her feet swinging above the floor, the baby gurgled then broke into a litany of, “wiggily, wiggily, wiggily.” In response, Roberts picked her up and swung her around and around. Collapsing with the children on the couch, for the first time since his family’s disappearance, Roberts gave a full-throated laugh of joy.

## *Story Behind the Story*

I've always wanted to fly, either in the bright blue sky or the star-speckled universe. The daughter of an airline flight engineer, I learned my numbers and letters helping update crew manuals and reading the instrument panel of an old Constellation. As a child lying in the grass of our central New Jersey farm, I would identify airplanes from their silhouette or tail logo and watch clouds drift across the sky. At one time I studied aviation and considered a career as a pilot, so it is not surprising that I set stories in outer space.

They say, "your first time is always special." That can apply to your first kiss, your first love, or the first story accepted for publication. *Pirates Reprise* was originally published in the *Martian Wave* ezine. It won the reader's vote for story of the month and appeared in the print anthology, *Wondrous Web Worlds Volume 9*. Since then four full-length novels have been published. But as they say, "your first is always special."

Come along with me as your tour guide as the naval heritage of yesterday and today moves into world of tomorrow.

*Aelen Henderson*

## *About Helen Henderson*

A published author, feature-story writer and correspondent, Helen has also written fiction as long as she could remember. Her heritage reflects the contrasts of her Gemini sign. She is a descendent of a coal-miner's daughter and an aviation flight engineer. This dichotomy shows in her writing which crosses genres from historical adventures and westerns to science fiction and fantasy.

Join her on travels through the stars, or among fantasy worlds of the imagination.

The journey begins at [helenhenderson-author.webs.com](http://helenhenderson-author.webs.com)

## *Other Works*

If you enjoyed this story, check out Helen's other works. Excerpts and buy locations for her novels can be seen at [helenhenderson-author.webs.com](http://helenhenderson-author.webs.com).

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