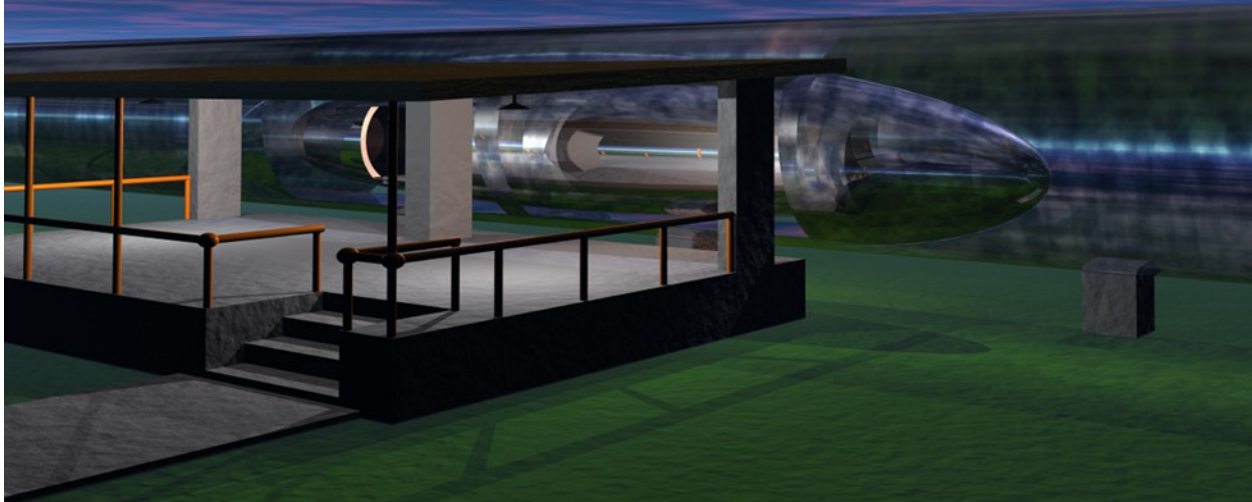




# *The Sword Review*

*Fantasy, Science Fiction & More*

**Currently Inside**  
**"The Last Hurrah"**  
**by L. S. King**



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# The Last Hurrah

*L. S. King*

Echoes of screams, cries of pain, and klaxons blaring filled Les' head along with images of bloody bodies.

"Departure for Orion Station, now boarding at Gate 13."

Les jerked upright and wiped the sweat from her face. *What had caused that flashback?*

Her face set, Les stood and straightened the jacket of the standard grey uniform. She headed for the departure gate, her bag in hand.

Recognition shone in the young man's eyes at the gate as he said, "Have a good trip, Colonel."

Les marched past in silence. After stowing the carry-on and sitting, Les tilted the seat back and pretended to be asleep, trying to shake off the haunting scene.

"Can't hide from me that way," a familiar grating voice said with a chuckle.

Les sat up, surprised but not unhappy. Blue eyes sparkled beneath shaggy eyebrows. "Stu Graham! How long has it been?"

"Years. Last time I saw you was at your seventieth birthday party. I hear you've finally taken retirement."

Les drank in the sight of her old friend. Oh, he had aged, hair now all white, but still that crooked smile and those knowing eyes remained unchanged.

"Yes, they forced the old horse out to pasture. But only after one last look at my first love."

Stu grinned. "Orion Station. Yes, you would make your final hurrah there, wouldn't you?"

"And what would you know of final hurrahs, hmm?"

"I made mine several years ago, you know. I'm just a civilian now."

"So I heard. I'm not officially retired for another week, and as a favor I'm inspecting my star base one last time." *Then I linger on, with only memories. And regrets.*

Stu snorted. "Whose arm did you twist for that?" Before Les could do more than raise innocent eyebrows, he added, "And don't give me any bull. I'd bet it was Marcus, wasn't it?"

"He owes me a few favors."

"Yeah, he does. He wouldn't have made General except for you."

Les pursed her lips, wondering if Stu knew all the reasons Marcus owed her. And what she owed Marcus. "So why are you heading out to Orion?"

Stu shrugged and Les twisted to stare at him. "You knew! Who told you?"

"Now settle down! I have my own sources and when I heard you were heading out there I got worried."

"Whatever for?"

"Things are volatile in that sector. Ever hear of the Orionis Axis?"

"The OA? Those vermin create trouble just to have a reason to fight. They're no large-scale threat. Especially not with Orion Station to deal with."

"They're growing in strength. You might be surprised."

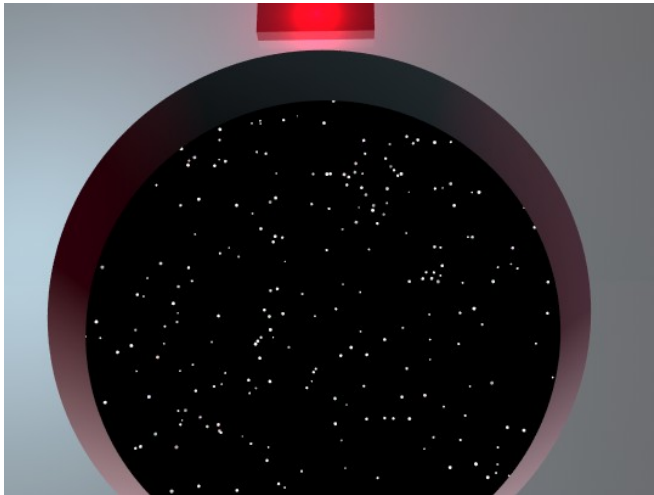
Les rolled her eyes and settled back into the seat, still unsettled by the flashback. She sighed. "You have any regrets, Stu?"

"Yeah. Who doesn't?"

"What are some of yours?"

"Marrying. Divorcing. Not being there for my kids." He hesitated and in a soft voice said, "Mars."

Les stiffened. "Let's not bring that up."



Stu looked away, quiet. The whine of the jump engines charging filled the cabin. The jumps only took a moment, yet the wait in between them, as the jump engines recharged, seemed an eternity. Les fell asleep. Stu joggled an elbow when dinner was served. Just like in combat when

they were young. No words, just a nudge—wake and eat.

"How long till the next jump?" she asked, stretching.

"Soon. You always could sleep anywhere and through anything."

Les chuckled. "So could you."

When the meal was almost finished, Stu asked, "What are yours?"

"My what?"

"Regrets."

Les exhaled. The list would be never-ending, but she followed Stu's example. "Never marrying. Having no kids to neglect for my career. Having no one who cares if I live or die." Mars was not going to be mentioned again, at least, not if Les had anything to say about it.

“Look around, Les. You’re not as alone as you would think.”

With a clenched jaw, Les took a bookpad out of her pocket and pretended to read. *The last thing I need is an old friend who wants to get sentimental.*

“Think the commander will have a detachment to greet you?”

“He’s not supposed to know I’m coming. Why do you think I didn’t come by military transport?” Les grabbed her bag and left Stu behind. Once past the security gate and into the ring that connected the civilian docking bays, she stopped.

The base had changed on the surface, with more vendors and superficial decor modifications. People jammed the ring—human and alien—all shopping, waiting for jump ships or local transports, and hawking their wares. Yet her eyes saw only the structure and that remained the same. She smiled in satisfaction. Her design. Her Baby. The first star base of its class. Strategically placed and a hub for all activity in this sector, Orion Station served as the prototype for all star bases.

Stu’s voice called out from somewhere behind and Les strode across the ring, hoping to lose him. No more emotionalism. She picked up her pace and managed to catch a lift just before the doors closed.

Although in a meeting, the commander talked to her, audio only, for a few moments, his voice fawning. “I am honored to have you here, Colonel Bayleson. I will have you shown to your quarters, and when I’m through here, I will gladly take you on a tour.”

“Commander Ellicott, a tour is unnecessary. I am here to inspect this installation. That will begin tomorrow at first rotation schedule. I would suggest instead of bootlicking that you put your energy into running this star

base." As the commander stammered a reply, Les could not resist an urge to rub his nose in his faux pas. "Oh, and Commander? You are supposed to have not only a working knowledge of this base but also its history. I suggest you refresh your memory before we meet tomorrow. Then perhaps you will ask me for a tour."

As she switched off the comm, Les winced; that was not necessary. Why be so hard on everyone all the time? Was she getting worse as she got older, or had she always been this way?

She settled into her assigned quarters, her introspection continuing. The door chimed and she called the command to open. Too late she realized her visitor almost certainly was—"Stu."

He leaned on the doorframe with a grin. "Did you think you'd get rid of me that easily?"

"Have I always been such a nasty old dragon?"

Stu burst into laughter. "Are you getting senile? Of course you have!"

"Oh, I don't mean to you. I mean to everyone. To subordinates."

"Yes. Why? What have you done—wait, what did you say or do to the base commander?"

Les shrugged, backing up to let her old friend in. "He offered to give me a tour..."

Stu barked an expletive while laughing. "Oh Les, what an imbecile! He deserves whatever you dished out."

A twitch pulled at the corners of Les' mouth. "I merely told him he needed to study the history of this place."

"And I can hear your staccato voice when you gave that order. Les, please, don't ever change!"

Les pivoted and stepped over to her bag. "Stop the mawkishness. It doesn't suit you."

"Mawkishness? Is that what you think it is? Can't an old friend display his feelings around you?"

"I've lived most of my life without such 'displays.' Why now?" Les turned to Stu, eyes narrowed. "What are you up to?"

At his innocent protestation she raised a hand, resigned. His real reasons would come out soon enough. "Skip it, Stu. Let's go see if the dining here has improved over the years."

"You're starting inspection in the morning, aren't you?" Stu asked as they shared an after-dinner drink.

"Yes."

"So, why are you going to nose around tonight?"

Eyebrows arching, Les glared at Stu. "Nose around? Can I spend time 'remembering-when' with that snot-nose commander and his flunkies around? I thought you of all people would understand."

"I do. But why not rest tonight? Let's go dancing."

"Dancing is for young people and old fools. I'm neither. Now shove off, Stu. I'll see you tomorrow."

Ignoring Stu's call, Les strode off to the bays.

Listening to echoes of the past whisper in her mind, she stared out the port of one of the docking bays in the small-craft ring. Two other two docking rings encircled the station proper, the warship ring, situated nearby, and the civilian ring at the far end. Beautiful curved lines—cool grey against black. Yes. This was what Les remembered. What she had wanted to see again.

With a reluctant exhale, she left the bay and began her trek back toward the station proper, in a better mood than she had been in for many months. Her gait did not change as a group of grim men approached, weapons drawn, but her eyes narrowed in expectation, while she did a quick tally. A dozen. *Not a welcoming committee, that's for sure.*

The tall, pale man in the lead leaned over her with a sneer as he took her sidearm. "What's an old bat like you snooping around here at night for?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"The question is, what business is it of yours?" His eyes flicked to his nearest companions. "Bring her."

Two men grabbed her arms. She stiffened then relaxed; she couldn't win against them all.

"What do you want?" she asked as they hurried her along.

"From you? Nothing. But you could get in the way. Since you want a nice stroll down memory lane, we're going to give you one. And when your body is discovered, everyone will think the senile old goat just tripped and fell into the Shaft while mooning over the reactors."

The Central Shaft? Her heart tripped faster and her stomach lurched into her feet. The kilometer-long Shaft housed not only the Orion Station's four fusion reactors but the two computer cores as well. "But why?"

"Shut up."

Les did as she was told, not in obedience but because she would get no more information that way. She had to use her brain. And her ears. They might yet say something that she could find useful. If she lived to use it. Who was she fooling? She couldn't overpower all these men, even in her youth. Her only chance was to survive the fall. But how? *Think, old woman. Think.*

Despite that maintenance workers used jetpacks, and safety rules abounded, regulations demanded the Shaft be kept at quarter-grav. But still, even reduced gravity plus speed equaled a messy splat. What were the odds that she could snag a support girder for one of the reactors before her speed increased too much? At her age? Having been behind a desk and not in top condition? She snorted to herself.

They approached a locked maintenance hatch and one of the men opened it. So. Was at least one of these men on maintenance or had they stolen a key? What else could they access then? What schemes did these men have that made murdering her so important?

Once inside, they continued along the maintenance corridor, the grav level diminishing. A few of the men swallowed several times, faces pale, obviously not used to being in reduced grav.

As they neared the platform that opened into the Shaft, her stomach roiled in emphasis that falling almost kilometer deep and having to try to grab something to save herself was a lousy plan. Looking ahead at the reactor to avoid the gut-churning distance under her feet, she determined to at least try to take some of them with her.

Two of the men dragged her toward the edge, their hold on her upper arms. She slammed a fist down into one man's groin. He let go and she rammed her shoulder into the other man's stomach, knocking them both backwards. Falling with exaggerated slowness to the floor, she rolled onto her back while he tried to pin her arms down. She tucked her knees between them and thrust. Back he flew into the Shaft with a scream.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot," the leader yelled. "It will set off security alerts!"

Three men reached down to grab her. She kicked one man's knee and he crumbled, rolling, holding his leg and howling. One man hauled her up, but she used the momentum against him and spun, twisting her arm out of his grasp. He fell back, teetered at the edge, and disappeared with a strangled cry.

The first girder loomed just below her. Could she grab it? No choice—in only seconds she would have too much speed to try again further down.

She felt many hands seize her and glanced at the leader while they shoved her toward the edge. His face hardened, eyes glittering. As she was thrown off the platform, her stomach heaved up her throat in fear and panic. Her arms and legs shot out to stay horizontal, trying to slow the fall. A dream. A horrible nightmare—she should jump awake now! But wind continued to rush past her face. Her heart pounded.

The first girder loomed just below her. Could she grab it? No choice—in only seconds she would have too much speed to try again further down. Her left arm hooked the beam and a cry of pain escaped as her body snatched to a wrenching halt. Fire tore through her arm and radiated through her body. Broken. No doubt her arm was broken. And her shoulder felt ripped from its socket.

Cursing silently at old brittle bones, she grabbed at the metal with her right hand, the muscles in that arm burning as she took one slow, long inhale, gritted her teeth and swung one leg up. The boot slipped off the girder, and she clenched her jaw against the agony in her left arm. *Too old for this.* Her attention on the metal beam, she tried again. Success! With painful slowness she struggled up onto the girder, her breathing so ragged that her chest felt compressed. She focused on the wall as she started her

crawl toward it and the ladder that led to the nearby platform marking a maintenance corridor.

Did the men stay to watch her fall? Could they see she had managed to thwart their intentions? No time for that worry. Get off the girder, out of sight, and take control of the base. Complete control. That meant accessing one of the two computer cores and locking the other out. Then she could try to find out what in the galaxy was going on.

Cradling her left arm and taking deep breaths to ease the tightness in her chest, she wound her way through the bowels of the base toward the walkway tube of the nearest computer core. Few others knew such ways to get to her destination unseen.

Les stopped—Core Control One, the room housing the first computer core should be at least singly manned. Could she handle fighting again? With a busted wing? Les leaned against the wall for a moment, eyes closed, thinking while trying to get her breathing back to normal. Despite the pain, her lips tipped in a slight smile and she hurried to the nearest sub-armory.

Les had no trouble with access. Of course, the quarter-master was being alerted, but Les didn't plan to stick around for the soon-to-arrive security detachment. With one weapon tucked in her beltband, and one in her right hand, she hurried back to the walkway tube. No one in sight—she ducked into the tube and across to Core Control One.

Weapon in hand, she opened the door, sliding inside and to the left so it would shut behind her. The tech stared wide-eyed, his hand straying to his sidearm.

"I wouldn't. Drop it—slowly—and get out."

"B-but Colonel..."

"Now!"

Face ashen, he obeyed and sidled to the door. After he left, she entered a security code to override any attempt to unlock the door—if it were still enabled. The green light turned red and an amber one began to flash. Les smiled.

“Hello, Baby,” she murmured, sitting down and letting her broken arm rest in her lap. She took a deep breath, trying to rid herself of the heaviness she felt. “Mama’s going to protect you from whatever these men are doing.”

Years of training, battles, and injuries forced her mind off her arm as she worked. She shut down the other computer core, routing all systems through this one. Monitoring systems, she locked out or restricted all functions of the station except life support. Powered transportation halted; docking bays sealed. Communications only worked through specific official channels.

As the commander and his men yammered in confusion, Les smiled, but her jaw set when unauthorized frequencies were hacked. She found no humor in those conversations. The Orionis Axis planned to take over the base as a precursor to a coup of the sector.

“Not my Baby,” she muttered as she began recording all conversations. Pain and fatigue weighed on her and she leaned back in the chair with a sigh. A familiar voice among the OA conspirators startled her back into a more alert state. Stu?

“You idiots! If you had let her alone and postponed your plans, she would have done her inspection and left. But no, you had to try to kill her!”

“Try to? She fell into the Central Shaft. She’s a smear at the bottom now.”

Stu swore unimaginatively. "She's not dead! Who do you think is behind all these 'malfunctions?' Do you think that half-brained commander could be doing this?"

"But how could she be behind it?"

"Didn't you listen when I told you who she was? She designed this place! Stem to stern."

"So she's an engineer as well as an officer, but the computer experience not to mention the codes necessary for what you're suggesting..."

"Are all in her sharp, old brain. She's alive. And could be listening to us now. Keep spread out. If she can net us together, it's over."

"It's over anyway, my old, dear friend," Les whispered, her heart in a slow simmer at his betrayal. He had been her back in battle after battle; they had saved each other's lives. They had both survived Mars.

"What about our ships? They'll be arriving in a few hours."

"Worry about ourselves at the moment. I don't know if I can override her or get to her, but I'm going to try."

"You do that," Les murmured with a quiet chuckle.

She needed outside help. Ellicott should be the one to call, but... Les pursed her lips, her eyes narrowing. Stu mentioned more than once that the commander was incompetent? If so, how did Ellicott get this position? She pulled up his file. A mediocre career but—Stu Graham recommended him for this position.

Les uttered maledictions under her breath. Her body was not responding well to the pain, and probably to the previous strenuous activity—had it affected her mind also? She must think straight. Was Ellicott in on the conspiracy, or had Stu planned this for a long time and want an idiot in charge to make it easier?

She continued to read Ellicott's history, hoping to find a clue. Ellicott's career did not commend him for this position. So bland, so ordinary, and somehow so wrong. Too perfect, too cut and dried. Almost as if—as if it were a cover profile. Her head snapped up. Could it be?

*Stupid old woman! Think!*

She took a deep breath—difficult to do with the increasing weight on her chest—and made her decision. She tapped into the channel the commander was using. "Commander Ellicott, this is Colonel Bayleson."

"Colonel? Where are you? What is going on?"

"Where I am is unimportant. I need you to go to your office. Alone. Now."

While she waited, she forced herself to take deep, even breaths, but her mind refused to clear, and the heaviness in her chest grew to a sharp pain. What she needed was a nap.

"I'm here," she heard him say. "Now what is it?"

She blinked, forcing herself alert. What was the current pass-phrase? "Ellicott, I once saw a ship embedded in a rock."

A pause. In a low voice he said, "It was written that way."

Les relaxed in the chair. He knew the answer. "Indeed. So. Stop the bumbling act. The Orionis Axis plan to disable this station and seize control. This is going to take ingenuity, and I'm only an old woman stuck in a small room. I am downloading pertinent information to your office's terminal. All the station's functions are under my direction control at the moment. They have ships due to arrive within a few hours. I shall unlock all weapons systems so you can take care of any external threats."

“Yes, this base’s weapons and fighter wings can handle virtually any attack. I’ll get the ships docked on both military rings and those on sector patrol into high alert. But what about internally?”

“The OA on this base, and their accomplice, retired Colonel Stu Graham, are scattering as they know I am on to them.”

“How many are there on station?”

“Unknown. The group that tried to kill me consisted of a dozen men, but two are now dead and one disabled. I don’t know how many others there might be. As I can pinpoint various signals from hacked frequencies, I can direct your men to where individuals or perhaps small groups of them are, so have your men ready.

“My overrides should keep them out of here, but by now they know where I am, and will try to figure out a way in. You must take charge in case they succeed. I assume that you know which of your men can be trusted, and that you’ve been monitoring the OA and their activities, waiting for this?”

“Yes, but we didn’t think it would happen this soon. From what I can see, you have the situation well in hand though.”

“For the moment. However, that could change. Who knows what confederates they have.” *Like Stu.*

“From our intelligence, most of them will be in the ships. Their plan, what I know of it, was to disable the base’s security. Many of my men were ‘placed’ by Graham, as was I. He thinks they have sufficient numbers either on their side, or incompetent enough, that they will encounter little resistance. With your help, I think we can nail these lunatics once and for all.”

“I do have one question.”

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Stu. Do you know why he's turned traitor?"

Silence. Ellicott finally said, "We think it was because of Mars."

"Bitterness, then? Not greed or power?"

"Who knows what they might have promised him. But since retiring, he's become vocal over that disaster, saying it wasn't just mishandled, but that you were all deliberately set up. That's our guess at motive. He wants our government set into chaos and thrown down."

Memories of Mars flooded over Les again and she clenched her jaw as she took a deep breath. A debacle, yes, but incompetence, not malice, had caused it; and those responsible had paid with the ruin of their careers. Les had seen to that surreptitiously, using Marcus. It had been her duty to all those who died. She closed her eyes as she saw and heard it all again, a nightmare that never faded. Would that she could find peace.

"Colonel?"

Les shook free with a frown. "Let's get to work, Commander."

The next few hours remained tense. Inside the base, Ellicott's men hunted the radicals.

Orionis Axis ships jumped in, mostly smaller vessels, frigate class with medium particle weapons, and strike carriers outfitted with shuttles. No war cruisers. They must have planned to disable the base's defenses from the inside then have their ships deliver more crew and weapons, not take on Orion Station in an overt strike. A good strategy against the formidable star base but it had turned into a slaughter.

A small red light drew Les' attention. All pre-igniters for the four fusion reactors had been brought online and the magnetic confinement was being

boosted. An overload. *Can't take control of the base so you're going to destroy it, eh?* Les snorted. *Not while I'm alive!* But—how did someone get in the primary control room with her lockdowns in place?

She notified security and opened both audio and visual for the control room. Stu. How had he obtained clearance codes to override hers? No—not hers. The station's. Fool! Why had she not used her own?

She pursed her lips in a tight smile as she locked out the command functions. Stu grunted and began banging on the now dead control panels, stating his opinion of their ancestry and sexual preferences.

Les' stomach churned with bitterness for the betrayal of someone who had been not only her friend, but her comrade-in-arms, her brother.

"It won't work, Stu," she breathed into the comm. Stu jerked around, looking up—prey aware of being stalked. She touched a control. "Magnetic confinement returned to normal." Her fingers flitted over the panel. "Pre-igniters offline. I will not let you kill my Baby."

He shook his fists in the air. "You always were obsessed by this place. It's only a thing, Les! A star base."

"You planned to use Orion Station as headquarters for your subversive activities. Did you think I wouldn't try to stop it if I found out? You know what this place means to me."

"It's strategic. And once we had this sector locked down, you wouldn't have been able to do anything."

"It's too late, now. You've lost. So tell me why."

"Because of Mars! I don't need to tell you what they did to us. They led us into a trap and ignored our pleas for help."

Would Stu even listen to the truth? No. His mind was made up. "So you help these murderers?"

“That’s all men are, you know that. Murderers and liars. It’s just a matter of which group you associate yourself with.”

Before Les could reply, the door burst open and Stu turned, swinging his weapon up at the security detail. Two men fired. His body fell to the cold, metal plating. Les closed her eyes with a swift inhale. *Stu. My old friend. How could it come to this?* The sharp pain in her chest swelled. She clenched her jaw, willing her rebellious body to obey her. “No,” she hissed. “Not until Baby is safe.”

She focused on the display in front of her, compelling every ounce of discipline and control she possessed to keep her body functioning. Soon. She could let go soon. She had done her duty one last time.

Ellicott called all secure a few minutes later. “I’m on my way, Colonel. I want to thank you in person.”

Les smiled, leaning back in the chair while her gaze drifted about the room, the mind and heart of her Baby. She unlocked her override, and closed her eyes as darkness began to envelop her, easing her pain—and her regrets.

Ellicott entered the room to see a frail-looking, grey-haired woman seemingly asleep in the chair, a peaceful smile on her face.

A homeschooling mom, and a grandma, L. S. King taught martial arts for years, and currently coaches gymnastics. She lives with her husband and youngest child in Delaware.

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Bill Snodgrass is on *The Sword Review* editorial staff. His fiction accomplishments are found at [www.billsnodgrass.com](http://www.billsnodgrass.com).