

ROBERT PLAMONDON

ONE SURVIVOR



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A Novel by Robert Plamondon

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One Survivor

by Robert Plamondon

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CHAPTER I

In her dream, sheets of flame billowed into the clear night sky. The roar of the fire and the thud of her ancestral home's falling timbers almost drowned out the wail of the fire alarm.

The firelight flickered across the woods. The Mockers lurked there, padding from one vantage to another, never quite coming into sight, their cat-like eyes reflecting the firelight.

Beverly stood alone, shivering, numbed by the wet grass under her feet and the wind cutting through her pajamas. Where were her parents?

BETRAYED, *laughed the Mockers silently.* THEY WERE BETRAYED.

Beverly woke suddenly, the dream still holding her. The alarm was still wailing, but she was in a tiny metal room. . . .

The dream receded and she realized where she was: in her cramped stateroom on the *Nine to Five*, a small merchant star ship travelling to an insignificant, underdeveloped planet called Barigost.

The door opened and Rodney—the young crewman who had been so attentive during space suit drills—came in. He flung her space suit out of her locker and pulled her out of bed, leaving her flailing in free-fall. Outraged, she shoved him away and began to voice a bitter complaint, but stopped when she saw his ashen-faced, barely-controlled fear. She had not seen such an expression since leaving her home world of San Vincento. This was not a drill.

Beverly took the space suit from Rodney, who spun around in a neat free-fall pirouette and fled the cabin. Since it was the *emergency* alarm that was sounding, and not the *disaster* alarm,

she dressed before putting on the suit, using the jump suit designed for the purpose. She was surprised to see that the legs of her pajamas were unstained by grass and soot. The dream was still fresh in her mind.

She had bound up her hair and was about to put on her helmet when her father appeared in the doorway, already wearing his suit, holding his helmet and holster in one hand. How had he found the time to get his plasma gun from the luggage?

He let go of the helmet—where it floated in free fall—and snapped the holster into place on his space suit. Beverly straightened up and hoped she looked presentable. She prayed that he wouldn't treat her like a child. She was fifteen years old.

"Captain Griswold has agreed to let you have the spare seat on the bridge," he said, drawing his plasma gun and flipping its switch to 'standby.' He glanced at the read-out and continued, "You'll be safer there, with the bridge armor. Your mother and I will stay on the passenger deck. Take this." Holstering his pistol, he reached into one of his suit pockets, producing Beverly's archaic yet beautiful Anderson pistol and ammo pouch.

There was a clang from above as someone slammed the turret hatch, then a series of high-pitched whines as the turret traversed back and forth, followed by a deep throbbing as the guns were powered up.

"There's a raider coming toward us. Captain Griswold hopes to escape by making a high-speed re-entry into Barigost."

Father has doubts about this, she realized. The pistols meant he feared a boarding action.

The intercom came on. "Acceleration in sixty seconds, my lord. Reducing cabin pressure now."

"Father—," began Beverly.

He waved her to silence. "No time. All my children have seen action young. Perhaps it's just coincidence. More likely not. Be

strong, *cara mia*, and don't forget your honor." He kissed her. "Run now."

The klaxons were drowned by a roar as most of the ship's air was vented out to space, a measure designed to prevent decompression damage if the hull were punctured, and to reduce the risk of fire.

Beverly put on her helmet and swarmed up the companion-way ladder. She reached the bridge just as Captain Griswold was saying "fifteen seconds" over the intercom. Myrna, the computer officer—oddly, the Goan crew insisted on first-name informality—pushed Beverly into the empty seat and strapped her in. The bridge was tiny: four seats had been crammed into an area smaller than any of Beverly's closets back home. Myrna pushed a few buttons on Beverly's console, bringing up a synopsis display but locking out the controls. She squeezed Beverly's shoulder and returned to her seat.

Larry, the navigator, had been arguing with her. "Of course it's a frigate—look at the drive signature! It out-guns us two to one." He drummed his fingers nervously on the arms of his chair.

Myrna shook her head. "You know perfectly well that the same drives are used in transports. It could be perfectly innocent freighter." She turned to Beverly and winked.

Larry's voice went shrill with indignation. "An innocent freighter? Accelerating at four gees? On a course that cuts us off from the planet?"

Before Myrna could needle him some more, Captain Griswold spoke. As was not uncommon on small freighters, he was pilot, captain, and owner. "Pipe down. Is everybody secured? Stand by for four gees."

He engaged the fusion drive. Before, they had been coasting toward the planet in free-fall, on their way in from the jump limit. Now the acceleration built until Beverly was pressed back

into her seat with four times her normal weight. The ship began to shake.

"Auto-evasion looks good," said Captain Griswold. "Guns, are you ready?"

"Just give the word, Cap," came the reply. 'Guns' was Gunther Ottobein; a cocky, tattooed, middle-aged little Goan from the Hasten Arcology, the most notorious slum in the Eight Worlds. Beverly liked him.

"Stand by. Hail them, Larry."

Larry hit a key. Beverly's console indicated that a selection of hailing methods were being attempted.

After a moment, Larry reported, "They're ignoring us."

"Figures," said Captain Griswold. "My lord di Mendoza," he announced over the intercom, "there's no radio contact with the bogey. We're going to stick to plan to make a high-speed re-entry to Barigost."

"Very good, Captain," said her father.

"Guns," said Captain Griswold, "You may fire at will."

"Twenty minutes to re-entry," said Larry, who had dropped the communications display and brought up course projections. "They're just inside extreme range. Effective range in about seven minutes."

The gunnery telescope showed the other ship as a dancing point of light. The resolving power of the telescope was the limiting factor in long-range gunnery, not the collimation of the powerful laser cannon.

The lights dimmed for about fifteen seconds as the guns fired.

"No damage," reported Myrna, who was in charge of most of the instrumentation.

The lights dimmed again. And again. And again. Myrna reported three more misses.

There was no sign of return fire from the enemy. Beverly wondered if they were holding their fire, or were just equally inaccurate.

“Larry, what’s underneath us?” asked Captain Griswold.

“We’re over the northern continent, at about one-seventy degrees west, sixty-five degrees north,” he replied.

“Damn,” said Captain Griswold. “That puts Ertrix ‘way on the other side.” He raised his voice. “Anybody know anyone on the back side of Barigost?” No one answered.

“Should I send a distress call anyway?” asked Larry.

“No. Hell, you know what a bunch of pirates the locals are.” He paused to change some parameters on his console. “It’s probably another of Laverak’s deserters.”

The next several minutes passed slowly, with the bridge crew absorbed in their tasks. Captain Griswold tweaked the auto-evasion parameters constantly, sometimes dropping to manual control for a few seconds. The experts said that interfering with the software was all nonsense, but most pilots did it anyway. Larry plotted and re-plotted re-entry paths based on differing amounts of damage to the ship. Myrna controlled the avionics and analyzed their data, updating the course and range displays.

Beverly, crushed into an acceleration couch by four gees, found the feeling of helplessness to be almost unendurable. She gritted her teeth and gripped the arm rests. There was nothing else she could do.

The ship was brushed by laser fire time and again, but the contacts were too brief to penetrate the hull. But every minute brought the two ships closer together.

The lights dimmed again. “Minor damage to the enemy,” reported Myrna. “Spectrometer shows no carbon or hydrogen.” These elements would have shown up if the plastics in the crew section, the hydrogen in the fuel cells, or the crew members had been hit.

“Oh, damn,” said Myrna, looking at updated information on her display. “It *is* a frigate.”

Beverly knew what this meant: the other ship had two turrets, while the *Nine to Five* had only one. Myrna must have deduced this from the firing patterns of the other ship, since the telescope still showed the other ship as a point of light; the shape of its hull could not be made out at all, let alone how many turrets protruded from it.

“They’re decelerating,” said Larry. “They’re not going to pass us—they’ll follow us in. Closest approach has lengthened to 13,000 kilometers. That’ll make things easier for a while.”

From the turret Beverly heard Guns crooning in his ghetto accent, “Come on, baby, come on, baby, just a little more, a little more...”

The lights dimmed again, and Beverly, watching the bridge console, saw sudden flashes of light pulse from the enemy ship. Numbers appeared beside it, giving estimated damage.

“They’re still under acceleration,” said Myrna. Looks like . . .” An explosion drowned out the rest of her sentence. The ship lurched, and the lights went out, then back on.

“Who’s here? Sound off!” shouted Captain Griswold. A babble of voices came over the intercom, including, Beverly heard with relief, both her parents’. “Guns? Sound off!” said Captain Griswold. “Guns?”

Beverly heard her father’s voice. “I’ll check it out, Captain. I’m only one deck away.”

“Right, my lord. Be prepared to move on my mark. I’ll reduce acceleration to two gees. Ready, set, mark.” Weight lifted from Beverly’s chest. Captain Griswold kept one hand on the master throttle. The fingers of his other hand drummed on the arm rest, and his eyes scanned the displays impatiently.

Fifteen seconds passed. Beverly heard her father again. “You’ve lost your gunner, Captain. The cannon may be okay. One

moment . . .” There was a pause. “All right, I’m in. Resume acceleration.”

Beverly’s heart raced. Her father in the turret! Did Captain Griswold have any idea of her father’s reputation?

Captain Griswold slammed the controls forward again. Laser fire again raked the *Nine to Five*, ripping a long tear in the hold. Captain Griswold ignored the cargo spilling out into space. Beverly was surprised. San Vincentan literature always portrayed Goans as cowardly money-grubbers.

Beverly heard her father in the turret. She’d been told that he’d talked to his guns in his Navy days, but she’d never thought she would hear it herself.

“Slowly, slowly,” he said, softly, dreamily, as if unaware that he spoke at all. “Line it up. That’s right. They rush to death; we await them.”

The range had closed to the point where the enemy ship displayed a wobbly, indistinct outline. In spite of this poor image, Lord di Mendoza played the lasers slowly from nose to tail, holding the darting, dodging ship in his sights for ten full seconds; puncturing crew decks, the hold, engineering—everything but the armored turret and bridge.

“What a hit!” breathed Myrna. “They’re reducing acceleration. Looks like fusor trouble. Their drive output is erratic.”

“Five minutes to re-entry,” said Larry.

There was a blinding flash as the enemy’s lasers played across the starboard bridge window. The armored quartz exploded into the bridge. Beverly saw Myrna die instantly as the pulverized quartz shredded her space suit and tore off her head. Quartz and steel shards rattled off Beverly’s space suit. Her vision was obscured by blood, smoke, and debris: she couldn’t see Captain Griswold on the far side of the cabin.

Next to her, Larry was also injured, his faceplate cracked and spattered with blood. He flailed around wildly. Red lights came

on all over the control board. With a roar, the remaining air left the bridge.

Captain Griswold shouted, "God damn it! Somebody take over Computers!" The air took most of the smoke with it, and it became possible to see clearly again. Both Captain Griswold and Beverly were unhurt. The Captain continued swearing, "What the hell happened to our avionics? How am I supposed to re-enter without my god damned avionics?"

Resisting an urge to close her eyes and pretend it wasn't happening, Beverly struggled out of her couch and staggered over to Larry. He had dozens of small ruptures in his suit, which she patched as best she could, following what she had learned in space suit drill. He had stopped flailing around, and was holding his faceplate with both hands. To her horror, she saw that the cracks in the right side went through all the layers of the faceplate. As she watched, fragments blew out, propelled by the air pressure inside the suit. She broke out more patches and struggled to patch the faceplate, fighting Larry's attempts to cover the cracks with his hands. Made weak and clumsy by the gee forces, her gloved hands sticky with sealer, the nightmare went on and on. Finally, with two-thirds of his faceplate covered with patches, she finished.

The suit mechanisms had cleared the blood away from the inside surface and revealed Larry's face. He was still conscious, and was quickly regaining his composure. Reeling under four gees of acceleration, Beverly barely made it back to her seat.

Beverly heard her mother. "Reduce acceleration, Captain. I will take Computers."

Captain Griswold instantly reduced acceleration. "Hurry up," he said. On partial throttle, the acceleration suddenly became erratic. "God damn it!" he swore. "What happened to the fucking drives?"

Beverly was appalled. Why couldn't he shut up and die like a gentleman?

Her mother appeared on the bridge and dumped Myrna's body out of the acceleration couch. Captain Griswold resumed the acceleration before she was fully in the seat; Beverly saw her land hard on her left hand and heard her gasp with pain.

She was thinking of inventive deaths for Captain Griswold—though it seemed redundant at this point—when her father started his dreamy litany again. "That's it . . . that's it. Into my sights. I am the Reaper."

The lights dimmed, and part of the enemy ship was enveloped in a huge explosion. Her father gave a humorless chuckle. In a normal voice he said, "*You* are the reapee."

Lady di Mendoza worked the computer. Her left hand seemed undamaged after all. Beverly watched, fascinated, as her mother rerouted power, assigned computer resources to different tasks, updated damage reports so the Captain would know how much strain his ship would take, and monitored the enemy ship; never pausing between one task and the next.

Larry had resumed his tasks, after a fashion. "They're still following. Looks like they have a death wish. Re-entry any second now."

As if on cue, the ship began to shake as it hit the outer atmosphere. Ionization around the ship jammed the instruments and cut off all contact with the pursuer. Buffeted and cloaked by the atmosphere, there was little chance the *Nine to Five* would be hit again. Soon the pursuing ship would enter the atmosphere in its turn, and would lose all contact with the *Nine to Five*.

Beverly was pushed into her seat by ever-increasing gee forces. The thin atmosphere shrieked around the broken bridge window. Her peripheral vision faded until it seemed that she was looking down a tunnel, then everything went black.

When the gee forces lifted, her vision returned. She looked around. She was pretty sure she hadn't lost consciousness. The nose of the ship glowed a dull red. Her mother was still working furiously at the computer console. Larry was unbuckling himself from his seat. Captain Griswold was fuming and cursing over the intercom at the engineer.

"The converter's *out*? Without power to the lifters we've only got five minutes till impact! Fix it, damn it! This ship is all I have!"

"Sorry, Captain. It's not broken: it's slagged down. Permission to jump?"

The Captain closed his eyes for a moment, trying to get a grip on himself. He took a deep breath. "Now hear this. We are going to abandon ship. Passengers and wounded first. Larry, take the girl and make sure she ejects first. Then the rest of the passengers, then crew. I'll go last."

The ship was falling like a stone. Beverly unbuckled herself from her seat. Her mother began unstrapping herself with one hand while still giving instructions to the computer with the other.

As soon as Beverly was free, Larry grabbed her and dragged her down the companionway. When he reached the ejection bay he stuffed her into an escape pod, slammed the hatch, and triggered the charge that ejected her from the ship.

Beverly felt the impact force the air from her lungs. Then she lost consciousness.

INTERLUDE

In her dream, she fell endlessly, her arms outstretched, the wind rushing past her fingers and streaming through her long black hair. The air was cold but sweet, without the harsh metallic tang of her ravaged world.

"This must be San Vincento before the Day of the End of the World," she thought. Sure enough, when she turned her gaze downward the ground far below was covered from horizon to horizon with rich greenery. Her eyes filled with tears. This world would have been hers if the Imperium had not betrayed San Vincento.

The rich green earth rushed up to embrace her.

CHAPTER II.

Beverly woke slowly. After a long time the dancing spots receded from her eyes and she could see clearly. She was in a small room with a cot, a sink, a first aid kit, and boxes stacked in the back. The room had an institutional look. A factory, perhaps, or a school. She was in her underwear, with a sheet and a rough wool blanket over her. She looked around for her jump suit and space suit—nothing. Then, remembering her training, she looked around for her pistol. It was nowhere in sight.

She sat up suddenly. This proved to be a mistake.

When next she awoke, her jump suit was folded, freshly washed, on the foot of the cot. She tried sitting up again, very carefully, and was rewarded by waves of pain and barely controllable nausea. She was able to dress, very slowly. She collapsed back on the cot when she was done. Her head hurt. She closed her eyes to make the spots go away. They didn't, but she kept her eyes closed anyway.

She woke with a start when a woman entered the room. She was plump and middle-aged; Beverly knew she was a school teacher the instant she saw her. The woman asked, "How are your feeling, dear? I'm Mrs. Smith."

Beverly felt weak and nauseous, her vision tended to go out of focus, the throbbing of her head was almost unendurable, and the room was spinning slowly on an uncertain axis. "Fine, thank you," she said. Her voice sounded weak. That wouldn't do. "Where am I?" That was better.

"This is the school infirmary at Hoover."

"Hoover?"

"Yes. We're a little town outside of Antipodes."

"Antipodes?"

“Are you sure you’re feeling all right, dear?” The teacher looked worried.

“I’m fine. Where are the other survivors?” Beverly was surprised her parents hadn’t found her already. They were much tougher than she was. She hoped they wouldn’t find her infirmity embarrassing.

“Well, I’m sure I don’t know. Ejection pods from as high up as yours would be scattered all over. They’re checking the radar tapes over in Wrenfield now. Wherever they land, they’ll be brought to Wrenfield. That’s the provincial capital, you know.”

“No, ma’am, I didn’t know.”

“Say, you’re not one of those Fort Nereid people, are you?” She looked at Beverly suspiciously.

“Certainly not! I’m San Vincentan.”

“Oh, from the Eight Worlds! It’s too bad you can’t stay for class! My fourth graders are studying the Eight Worlds in geography. They’d just *love* to see someone who’s really from the Pale. The only person I know who’s even been there is Peer Sandra, and it’s not wise to let her talk to the children, if you know what I mean.”

Beverly didn’t have the slightest idea what she meant.

“Anyway, the ambulance should be here any minute to fly you to Wrenfield.”

“That reminds me, ma’am: I had some personal effects in my space suit. Could I have them?”

“You didn’t have anything but your pistol. The commissar saw that and took it with him. Don’t worry, honey, you ought to be able to buy it back from him.”

Beverly was annoyed. Did the woman really mean to imply that her pistol had been stolen by a government official? She had heard that Barigost had a peculiar form of government (with a fairly recent socialist bureaucracy somehow coexisting with an existing aristocracy with a monopoly on space flight), but had

never dreamed that any bureaucrat, however corrupt, would have the impudence to trifle with *her*. Whoever this ‘commissar’ is, she thought, he’ll wish he had never been born when Father finishes with him.

“Now, I’m supposed to get a little information for our records. What’s your full name, honey?”

“Beverly Maria Elizabeth Deborah Catherine di Mendoza.”

“All that?” Beverly had to repeat it again several times before it was all written down. The woman suddenly realized what the “di” meant. “Oh, my! I didn’t realize you were a member of the aristocracy, my lady.”

“That’s all right.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

Mrs. Smith looked over the rest of the form. Beverly could see that it was several pages long and contained a great many questions. “Most of this doesn’t apply to you, I’m afraid,” she said. “And you still look very pale. Perhaps I can leave the rest of this to the people at the hospital.” She looked worried.

They heard a flyer approaching. “That will be the ambulance now,” said Mrs. Smith, putting aside her paperwork with relief. “Just sit still; they’ll bring a stretcher.”

She bustled out. She returned in the company of two people: a short red-haired woman with a large medical bag, and a cheerful man of medium height who wheeled in a folded stretcher. The woman was obviously a medic or doctor. The man was equally obviously a pilot, in spite of his apparel—it was a little odd seeing a pilot in a knee-length woolen tunic, baggy white pantaloons, and high laced boots in addition to his flying helmet. His clothes were probably normal garb for men on Barigost. The women wore stockings instead of trousers, and shoes instead of boots, but otherwise their dress was similar.

The woman knelt by the bed and took Beverly's pulse the old-fashioned way; with fingers over her wrist. Beverly had only seen this in historical dramas.

"Mrs. Smith was my teacher in fifth and sixth grades, Gwen," said the pilot, deciding that, since Beverly showed no signs of expiring on the spot, it was safe to make conversation. "She said I'd never amount to anything."

Gwen peered into Beverly's right eye with a lighted instrument. Beverly felt like she had been handed over to the village witch doctor.

While looking into Beverly's left eye, Gwen said, "She was right." She added, "Aren't you going to report in?"

"In a minute." The pilot smiled winningly at the teacher. "Mrs. Smith, could you possibly scare up a cup of coffee for a hard-working pilot?" As Mrs. Smith went off to see what she could arrange, the pilot keyed the microphone on his flying helmet. "Station 100, this is Ambulance 4. We've picked up, uh . . ." he peered at the forms that Mrs. Smith had given over to him. "One adolescent female from an escape pod. We're heading back now." He sat down on the only chair in the room, took off his helmet and smiled at Beverly. "Little white lie."

Just as Gwen pronounced Beverly fit to travel, Mrs. Smith came in with two cups of coffee. Seeing the second cup, Gwen reversed her decision and declared that Beverly needed a few minutes' rest before being put onto the stretcher.

They had just picked up their mugs when Ed's helmet started squawking, "Ambulance four! Ambulance four! We've got a tractor accident over in Notai. Two trauma cases. Heavy bleeding, partial amputation, and a possible femoral fracture."

The two were on their feet in an instant. "We'll come back for you, sweetheart," said Ed. "This other one takes precedence." They raced outside.

Beverly lifted the venetian blinds on her window in time to see Ed and Gwen run across the parking lot and climb into their craft; an ugly twin-fan flyer that looked as if it had seen plenty of service. It was dirty, too—the bright red crosses looked almost brown under the grime. Ed spooled up the fans and it lifted into the air in a huge cloud of dust.

The area around the school was absolutely flat. Most of it consisted of recently plowed fields. A short distance down the only visible road was Hoover proper, with a water tower and about a dozen buildings, one of which proclaimed **HOOVER FEED STORE** in giant letters. A tall windowless building with metal walls read **PEOPLE'S COOPERATIVE MILL**. Beverly wondered what function a people's cooperative mill served. San Vincenzo was not an agricultural world.

The ambulance was rising over the endless fields when a second flyer emerged from the clouds and roared up behind it. A plume of smoke raced from the intruder toward the ambulance, and the ambulance erupted into flame. It fell two hundred meters onto newly-plowed farmland. The wreck exploded on impact.

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Smith stared at the distant wreck. She wrung her hands and said, "The poor dears. Oh, the poor dears."

Beverly stood up—and was mildly surprised that she could do so—and took Mrs. Smith by the hand.

"Mrs. Smith, you must hide me. Those people were after *me*. If they find out I'm still alive, they'll kill me. Mrs. Smith, *please*. My father can take care of them, but I have to reach him first."

The woman sighed. "Yes, all right, dear."

She considered for a moment. "There's nothing for it but to call my husband to pick me up. It's a good thing it's after school hours. But I'd better phone the commissar first and tell him that you're dead."

"And don't mention me on the phone to you husband."

Mrs. Smith smiled. "Don't teach your grandmother, dear. I've done some smuggling in my time, years ago. Most of us do, around here." She went off to make arrangements.

Mrs. Smith came back a few minutes later, looking subdued. She sat on the chair and stared out the window.

"I don't know how to tell you this, dear, so I'll just tell you. The commissar looked over the tapes from the provincial radar network. He says that only one escape pod ejected. The ship crashed 300 kilometers from here, at high speed. There were no survivors."

"No . . ." Her parents, dead? It wasn't possible. They were both so strong. They couldn't die here, in this backwater, after surviving such potent hardships in the past. It didn't make sense.

Mrs. Smith continued, "The other ship, the one you were fighting, got away. The commissar thinks it must have landed on this side of the planet. It was badly damaged, he said."

Beverly hardly heard her. How could her parents be dead? They were so much stronger than she.

She was still in shock when Mrs. Smith's husband arrived. Jonathan Smith was a big potbellied farmer. He looked like a jovial man, but he was grim now. He hurried his wife and Beverly into his decrepit ground car. He started the noisy internal combustion engine, and they rumbled down Hoover's only road.

Beverly stared out the window absently as they drove along. For the first thirty kilometers or so it was unbelievably monotonous: freshly-plowed fields punctuated by rambling, picturesque wooden farmhouses perhaps once every kilometer. Afterward the ground became hillier, and the fields gave way to pasture and woodland. Beverly had never seen anyplace so rustic. San Vincento had been an industrial world during the Imperium, and had been thoroughly nuked during the Day of the End of the World. The combination left it unsuited to widespread agriculture.

Barigost seemed well-suited to agriculture. Beverly had heard that, since it had no axial tilt and no seasons, crops could be grown year-round anywhere they could be grown at all. The poles were perpetually cold and the equatorial regions were perpetually mild. From the chill in the air, it appeared that Hoover was near the polar regions.

They drove for two hours over the narrow, winding country road, climbing progressively steeper hills, when they suddenly reached the top. Antipode Valley stretched out before them, beautiful in the late afternoon sunshine. The green slopes were covered with terraces. A town filled the bottom of the valley, and there was a small space port nestled up against the hills on the west side of the valley. This placement was an old trick to keep space-borne raiders from taking the most convenient attack path: an approach from the west that followed the planet's rotation.

There was a guard post at the summit, next to a sign that read:

NORTHEASTERN PROVINCE TOWN

#239

“Antipodes”

Pop. 19,420 Elev. 300 m

**A Loyal Populace is the Keystone
of the People’s Government**

**SECURITY STATION:
Stop and Show Travel Papers**

Jonathan stopped the car, and a guard in a cheap-looking grey uniform came up to the window.

“Hiya, Jonathan,” said the guard. “Didn’t expect you in to-day. What’s your business?” He held a clipboard in his hand, and a revolver in a holster on his belt.

“I’m not here, Bob,” said Jonathan.

The guard put down his pencil. “Really? I thought you didn’t do that anymore. Going to the station?”

Jonathan nodded.

The guard said, “I’ll have to check.” He went into the guard-house and made a phone call. After waiting for several minutes he spoke briefly into the phone, then came back out to the car. “Sandy says come on down. I didn’t see nothing.”

He went back to the guardhouse and Jonathan drove away. No mark had been made on the guard's clipboard.

As they wound down toward the valley, they saw a large truck toiling up the road.

"Get down," said Jonathan, "and cover yourself with this blanket."

Beverly lay down in the footwell, under the blanket, and so didn't see the truck pass.

"Militia," grunted Jonathan. "Figures."

Mrs. Smith replied, "It's a good thing we hurried, dear. Once the militia sets up the roadblock, there won't be any anonymous travel until the all-clear. I hope we can get home before class tomorrow."

"Ha," said Jonathan. "Wreck the whole set-up, if we're missing tomorrow. Sandy'll fix it."

The road took them through the town. A variety of attractive wooden buildings made the town a pleasant place, but it was defaced by a clot of soulless concrete structures. These buildings seemed to be mostly government offices and apartments. Beverly could not imagine what kind of catastrophe could have induced the locals to build such hideous buildings when their normal style was so much more attractive.

They passed several more trucks filled with militiamen. After ducking back under the blanket twice more, Beverly became dizzy, and stayed in the footwell until they left town. They passed a pair of anti-aircraft installations perhaps a kilometer out of town, and Mrs. Smith gave the all-clear. Beverly sat back up again.

The space port was three kilometers out of town, in an area strangely devoid of militia. The port was dominated by an opening, fully forty meters square, in a cliff on the far side of the port. The opening was guarded by a pair of immense sliding doors, which at the moment were mostly closed, leaving an opening

three or four meters wide. Four centuries after the Fall, the doors still bore a faded Terran Imperial eagle.

A ceramic landing field lay in front of the doors. It had originally been quite large, but most of it had been allowed to decay into jumbles of tilted slabs, piles of rubble, clumps of trees, and irregularly-placed craters. Only a few hectares immediately in front of the doors showed any sign of maintenance.

The decline of this tiny spaceport mirrored the decline in the holdings and technology of mankind. Where had the glory gone?

Only three—no, four ships were down. A 200-ton merchantman of local manufacture, sporting a woefully inadequate single-tube laser turret, was parked near the doors. A beautifully streamlined 400-ton raider with two tri-mount turrets, also a local, was out toward the center of the maintained area. An armed merchant of perhaps 400 tons was well inside the station. It, too, had a primitive look, but in a different way from the other two. A little more advanced, perhaps, or from far away. Finally, almost obscured by trees and a heap of rubble was a tiny, almost ridiculously streamlined ship of perhaps 150 tons, sporting empty mounts for two forward-firing laser tubes, and presenting a battered, primitive appearance. It had just enough lights showing that it didn't look like salvage.

Mr. Smith parked the car and went through the big doors, speaking to an armored guard. Unlike the guard at the checkpoint, whose uniform had been cheap and ill-fitting, this one wore an impressive, carefully tailored red-and-yellow uniform.

Beverly had almost fallen asleep when Mr. Smith returned with a middle-aged woman wearing a faded red-and-yellow flight suit and an air of authority, accompanied by two armored men in neatly-tailored red-and-yellow uniforms (the same as worn by the guard at the door) and a girl of about eighteen in a grey dress of some expensive-looking natural fiber. All but the girl wore

hand blasters, which must have been imported at great expense from the Eight Worlds.

The woman in the flight suit had never been attractive, and her appearance was marred by an ugly, jagged scar, not entirely healed, that started above her left eyebrow and ended halfway down her left cheek. The eye patch told the rest of the story.

Beverly shuddered. Barigost was even more primitive than she had supposed. Anyone inside the Pale would have had regeneration therapy and grown back the eye. And nothing even resembling proper treatment would leave a scar.

The situation was unnerving: the glowering hillside stronghold, the guards with their gaudy uniforms and expensive weapons, and the swaggering, scarred leader made it seem that Beverly had fallen into the hands of a barbarian chieftain rather than an official of a bureaucratic state.

The woman peered at Beverly and motioned for her to roll down the window. This proved difficult. The window was held together with improvised repairs. The window crank was long gone and the window was held up with a wire hooked over the top of the frame. Beverly unhooked it and the window thudded open.

“Welcome to Antipodes,” said the woman unsmilingly. “I’m Peer Sandra O’Hare.” She jerked a thumb at Mr. Smith. “Jonathan here told me about your problem. I can hide you, and smuggle you out in a couple of days to the San Vincentan consul, or trade representative, or whatever the hell he’s called. We’ll put you up in that old Morversarn job over there,” she gestured toward the smallest ship, “and my daughter will take care of you. You need anything, just let her know.” She turned and walked off, her two bodyguards trailing behind her.

Hardly a warm reception, thought Beverly. Still, Peer Sandra had offered sanctuary and even delegated her own daughter to

look after her. In substance, if not in style, Beverly could not fault Peer Sandra's hospitality.

The girl climbed into the front seat to indicate the path to the ship. Mrs. Smith got in the back with Beverly.

Jonathan jockeyed his car toward the ship, maneuvering around potholes, rusting machinery, piles of debris, and clumps of bushes. When they got near it, Beverly could see an amazing collection of machinery strewn around the ship. Some pieces were covered with plastic tarps, while others had been left out to rust. Tools were scattered here and there, as if their users had suddenly been called elsewhere. There were lights on in the bridge. The ship was a tail-lander, and Beverly eyed the steep entry ladder with alarm.

They pulled up and stopped. The girl got out of the car and opened Beverly's door for her. She was petite, about the same height as Beverly. She had short red hair, blue eyes, and freckles. "Can you walk?" asked the girl. "I'm sure George and Jonathan could carry you inside. I'm Emily, by the way."

"How do you do. I'm Beverly di Mendoza—and I'm fine," she lied. She had been carted around enough for one day. She stood up slowly, and started for the ship.

Beverly was seeing stars when she reached the foot of the ladder. She shrugged off offers of assistance, and, after resting a moment, climbed the ladder. She had to stop to rest twice while climbing the fifteen rungs. She crawled in through the airlock, and collapsed onto the deck of the cargo hold.

She looked around as she regained her breath. The ship was a disaster area. It was reasonably clean, and more or less intact, but the *technology*! She'd never seen interior hull plates held on with round-head rivets before. Neither had she seen a ship whose main structure consisted of welded steel tubing, or used incandescent bulbs. Amazing! Even the airlock had mechanical, not electronic, interlocks to keep both doors from being opened at

the wrong times. Not that the interlocks were doing anything at the moment, since the inner door was lying on the deck.

Emily came in after her, then climbed the central companionway toward the bridge. Mrs. Smith appeared in the airlock. "Well, we'll have to head on home now, dear, in case the commissar drops by with some questions. Peer Sandra will get us past the roadblocks, so don't worry about us. I see I'm leaving you in good hands."

With an effort, Beverly managed to straighten up and reply formally, "Mrs. Smith, I will not forget what you have done for me. Thank you."

Mrs. Smith made some disclaiming noises, obviously pleased, and left.

A heap of what appeared to be bedding fell down the companionway and landed at Beverly's feet.

"Heads!" called Emily.

Emily returned. She was accompanied by a tall blond youth of about eighteen. "Beverly, this is Peer George Heinz. He owns this alleged ship." Beverly muttered a greeting, and Emily and George went to work improvising a bed, starting with two immense but realistic-looking polar bear skins in lieu of a mattress, and finishing with quilts and blankets.

"By the way," said George, helping Beverly to the bed. "If you need to use the bathroom, call Emily. The ship's plumbing was designed for Morversarn—very dangerous." With that heartening piece of advice, he climbed back to an upper deck.

Beverly barely heard him. She was still a little dizzy from her climb. She closed her eyes to keep the room from spinning, and quickly fell asleep.

INTERLUDE

Excerpt from the Barigost State Radio News, Ertrix Evening Edition, May 7, 3150. Arnold Jarnholz, announcing.

...Grand Peer Fabian hosted ceremonies today in honor of retiring Dr. Carlson Brunfield; who has for thirty years held the post of Terran Ambassador to Barigost. Dr. Brunfield is retiring from diplomatic service, having accepted a position with the University of Sydney. The Grand Peer spoke for all Barigost when he praised Dr. Brunfield's long history of skillful treatment of the sensitive problems between our two worlds.

Dr. Brunfield's replacement, Johann Billings, was introduced to the Peerage at the ceremonies. Ambassador Billings is without previous diplomatic experience.

Also present was the new Under-Ambassador, Mr. Davis, a junior member of the Terran Diplomatic Corps. The post of Under-Ambassador has been vacant since the untimely demise of its previous occupant, Mr. Black, in an arctic hunting accident.

Peer Benedict Freeman of Valans has returned from a lengthy voyage to Valhalla, where he reports that Oman Laverak, the New Carinan

adventurer, has gained near-complete control of the Valhallan planets of Nubonn, Orwec, and Maril. Furthermore, Corsu has been pressured into accepting Laverak's rule by so-called "acclamation."

Peer Benedict fears that it is inevitable that all Valhalla will slide into Laverak's grasp. Laverak has not reached his hand toward Pertis, gateway between Persol and Valhalla, but he reports that this may just be a matter of time.

Already deserters from Laverak's forces have used their ships to raid Dancel and Northstar. Will Laverak himself attempt to finish what his deserters have started? Only time will tell.

In local travel news, the Goan merchant Nine to Five, a frequent visitor to Barigost, was destroyed by an unknown ship just outside the atmosphere. Most of the battle took place outside detector range, but the mayday message sent as the crippled ship plummeted through the atmosphere indicated that the ship, commanded as usual by Captain August Griswold, had been attacked by a frigate of Eight Worlds manufacture. The passenger list and cargo manifest are unknown. It is hoped that the *Nine to Five* gave as good as it got. Captain Griswold and his ship had been visiting

Barigost for many years, and his presence will be missed.

In a bizarre twist, an ejection pod from the Nine to Five grounded near N.E.V. 1412 Hoover, near N.E.T. 239 Antipodes. The occupant, an unidentified teen-aged girl, was killed when the ambulance taking her to the hospital was shot down by an unknown flyer.

Both Government House and the Soviet have joined to condemn this depraved act of brutality, without even the desire for plunder to excuse it. As all aboard the *Nine to Five* were lost, we can only wonder at the motivations of their attackers.

The Grand Peer has again pressed for the rebuilding and interlinking of the local radar nets, the construction of detector satellites, and the centralization of defense forces. The Grand Peer described such actions as "the only method whereby the State can protect its citizens." Spokesmen of the Peerage scoffed at this idea in today's session of the Soviet, calling it "an exercise in demagoguery and a transparent attempt to wrest control of the planet's defenses from the People."

CHAPTER IV

Beverly found the next morning rough going. Her head hurt, and Emily's forced, false cheerfulness just made her feel worse. She tried not to think of her problems. It wasn't easy.

After breakfast—made from some of George's store of antique canned and frozen food—George and Emily tried drawing her story out of her. Beverly soon decided to trust them (not that she knew anything sensitive enough for security to be a concern). They were both members of the Barigost aristocracy, such as it was. Emily was clearly trusted by Peer Sandra; while George obviously spent all his time working on the ship and didn't seem to have much opportunity to gossip. And they seemed such cheerful, trusting, simple souls—nothing like her classmates back home.

So she told them her story, using few words. She told it without emotion, her eyes fixed on the bulkhead. She had to struggle to maintain her composure. Her father would not have wanted her to cry in front of strangers.

When she had finished, George said, "I don't understand it. Taking the *Nine to Five* would make sense, though Griswold had a tough reputation—that was a valuable ship—but that attack wasn't piracy. It was assassination. Nobody could have salvaged that ship on a re-entry trajectory, and raiders don't shoot people down for fun. Not very often, anyway. No money in it." He looked at Emily.

Emily said, "It doesn't make sense to me, either. If they were gunning for your parents, why did they go to all the extra trouble to take you out, too?"

Beverly stared at the curved bulkhead. "Maybe they were just after Father, and wanted to kill the rest of us to keep the word

from leaking out. With no survivors, and without a passenger list, no one would know to send word to San Vincenzo.” She sighed. “Father never made any enemies. He was very proud of that.”

“Why was he here, anyway?” asked George. “The direct route to Valhalla goes through Villahove—it doesn’t come anywhere near here.”

“I don’t *know*. He wouldn’t tell me.” Her father had never taken her into his confidence. He had felt differently about his sons. Her eldest brother Richard had been apprenticed to her father at fourteen, and sat in on staff meetings. Her brother Miguel, six years her senior, had done the same. But her father had always insisted that politics and the military were not for her. She had resented it bitterly, but he was not a man easily swayed. Thus, the day he burst into their suite on Terra, glowing with barely suppressed excitement, cut short their sightseeing and changed all their travel plans, he had told her nothing of what was going on, or why it made him so happy.

“It must be Laverak,” said George. “Your father would hardly be sent to Valhalla on a mission that *didn’t* have something to do with Laverak and the civil war. Laverak’s got Eight Worlds mercenaries and everything. Your father must have been trying to get in by the back door—cross Persol and enter Valhalla through Pertis.”

Emily said, “In any event, we need to get you off-planet. We could either take you to the capital at Ertrix—a ship leaves Ertrix for the Eight Worlds every month or two—or we could smuggle you out from here.”

George leapt up and gave Beverly a sweeping bow. “My ship is at your command, my lady! Just say the word, and I will whisk you back to your home in my trusty, light-footed vessel.”

“Trusty? Light-footed?” asked Emily. “The lifters *explode* if you open the throttles too fast! The converter’s still broken, and you *sold* the life-support system!”

“Details, details,” He waved aside the objections. “But seriously, I’m pretty sure I could get you back to Mordel. It shouldn’t take more than three jumps. Call it two months of travel time.”

“Three jumps?” asked Beverly, surprised. “We got here from Mordel in one jump. It took five days.”

“That was an Eight Worlds ship,” said George. “This one is primitive. Great in the atmosphere, great at high-speed re-entries, terrible in hyperspace. Worse than Morversarn ships, even. I don’t know who made it, but the Morversarn took it away from them, and we took it away from the lizards a year ago. It’s slow, it’s noisy, it eats fuel like crazy—but what the hell, a ship is a ship! Besides, I got it for free.”

Emily turned to Beverly. “We need to get you some clothes so you look more like a local.”

“I’d be happy if you could find a pistol for me, too.” Whoever wanted her dead might try a direct, personal assault next time.

George grinned. “Did someone say ‘pistol’? I’ll be right back.” He dashed up the companionway.

As he disappeared, Beverly steeled herself to ask a personal question of Emily. “Is he always like this?”

Emily patted her arm. “He’s on his best behavior.” Emily went upstairs, and came back with some of her clothes for Beverly to try on.

There’s definitely something going on between those two, thought Beverly, *if Emily keeps her clothes here.* Back home it would be quite a scandal; perhaps a lethal one. Irregular liaisons tended to lead to ostracism and duels. She couldn’t work up any sense of disapproval, though. Her stay on Terra had numbed her sense of propriety.

It turned out that Emily’s clothes fit Beverly well enough. She was soon garbed in a navy blue woolen tunic, cotton leggings, and heavy shoes. Not exactly high fashion. Beverly was surprised

at the almost exclusive use of natural fibers—such things were expensive on San Vincento.

George came back down with a duffel bag full of weapons. “This,” he said, pulling out an immense pistol that must have weighed six pounds, “is a Morversarn revolver. Impressive, eh? It shoots magnum shotgun shells.”

He displayed a series of equally unsuitable sidearms, then relented and displayed his *pièce de résistance*. “Here we go! How about a San Vincentan service revolver?” He pulled out a venerable large-caliber revolver. “I’ve even got a hundred rounds for it.”

Beverly took the pistol. She recognized the type. The pistol dated from the time of the formation of the Three Worlds—Terra, Goa, and San Vincento—before New Carina was admitted, and long, long before the admission of Great Belt, Redstar, the Pleiades Federation, and Outback.

“My, my,” she said. “A 11mm Navy—a ‘Rodriguez revolver.’ The brass pieces mean it’s a captain’s weapon.” She swung out the cylinder and looked down the barrel. The rifling was barely worn, and the alloy showed no sign of pitting. “Wonderful condition. It’s about two hundred years old, George. Obsolete, of course. We’ve always used energy weapons exclusively, except in the depths of the Troubles.” She closed the cylinder and sighted down the barrel. The pistol fit her hand nicely. “This is a valuable collector’s item. How did it end up here? We’re two hundred parsecs from San Vincento.”

“Beats me,” said George. “It was on the ship, greased up and wrapped in plastic. It might have been bouncing around for all this time as a trade item. If you like it, it’s yours. You’re a gun buff, then?”

“No, not at all,” said Beverly, working the action a couple of times and testing the trigger pull. It was just the way she liked it. “But we have a pistol like this at home. It belonged to the first

Lord di Mendoza. George, I'm serious about it being valuable. I think you could get 10,000 bezants for it."

George whistled. "Well, carry it, at least."

"Thank you." She looked at her tunic. "How do people normally wear pistols around here?"

"Well, that's the tricky part. Young ladies don't carry weapons on Barigost. You'll have to conceal it, probably under your skirt. I've got a holster for it, somewhere."

George went back upstairs and rummaged around, and returned with a leather holster—brittle, but intact—saddle soap, neat's-foot oil, and a flannel rag. Beverly had never seen natural leather cleaners before. Following George's directions, she cleaned the holster with saddle soap and rubbed as much neat's-foot oil into the leather as it would absorb. It absorbed a lot. George promised that with a couple of additional coats of oil, the leather would be supple again. He then disappeared into the engine room.

Beverly rigged a gun belt to wear under her skirt. With the holster strapped to her leg the pistol left a bulge in the fabric, but the heavy wool kept it from being too noticeable. The tunic had pockets in the same place, so it looked more like she had something in her pocket than a concealed weapon under her skirt.

Beverly had just put the gun belt aside when Peer Sandra climbed up through the airlock.

"Morning, Beverly. How have the kids been treating you?"

"Fine, thank you, my lady."

"Since you looked pretty wasted yesterday, I figured it wouldn't hurt if you lay up here for another day. I'll run a ship to Ertrix tomorrow. That okay with you?"

"Fine, thank you, my lady." Maybe her head would hurt less tomorrow. Maybe her heart would hurt less tomorrow.

"Glad to hear it. Well, see you around. Don't let George take you for any test flights."

“I won’t.” *That’s for sure.*

Peer Sandra then gave Emily a long list of errands: picking up supplies in town, doing an inventory on spare parts, writing a note to Peer Khirchoff explaining that they couldn’t attend her party. Beverly suppressed a twinge of jealousy; Peer Sandra had made her daughter a part of the family business. Emily clearly didn’t share Beverly’s opinion that this was a good thing. She shot Beverly an aggrieved look, and left with her mother.

George wandered in a few minutes later, with an unidentifiable piece of greasy machinery in his hand. “What happened to Emily?”

“She’s running errands for Peer Sandra.”

“How am I supposed to get this ship running if Dragon Lady keeps stealing my slave labor? First the entire repair crew is called up for militia duty, and now this.”

After a moment he looked at Beverly with a crafty gleam in his eye. “Feeling better today, are you?”

“Much better, thank you, George.”

“If you wanted something to keep you busy, there are some Morversarn video shows on tape.”

“No, thank you.”

“The government channel is showing the world chess championship.”

“No, thank you, George.”

George flashed a crocodilian smile. “Well, that leaves helping me on the bridge. I’m putting in another acceleration couch. Want to help?”

Beverly suppressed a sigh. She needed something to keep her occupied, she supposed. “I’d be delighted,” she said, and followed him up to the bridge. She was pleased to find that she could climb the ladder without difficulty.

Like most small tail-landers, this ship had a tiny bridge that made no concessions to comfort. The “deck” of the bridge was

toward the belly of the ship; sitting in a bridge seat meant lying on your back, face-upward.

George put Beverly to work as an “other-ender,” holding pieces of equipment in place while he worked on them. This was just as well, since she had little or no mechanical experience.

George had installed an expensive sound system on the bridge. After playing a couple of pieces of mind-numbing Valhalla music, George relented and let Beverly choose the program.

They cut out the remaining Morversarn acceleration couch (too large for humans, and the cutout to allow the passage of a tail was a nuisance) and lowered it out the emergency airlock on the port side of the bridge. They then winched up a more suitable seat.

Not happy with the way the Morversarn had simply welded the seat to the deck, George spent a great deal of time installing stanchions so the seat could be removed or replaced easily. After he bolted the seat in place, he routed power and communications lines to all the seats. He was a meticulous worker; Beverly was impressed.

When everything was in place, George said, “Try it out.”

Beverly sat in the seat and fiddled with the power adjustment controls until it fit. “It seems fine,” she said. The seat was old. Its upholstery was cracked in places, and the color didn’t match the other two seats. Beverly saw no need to point this out.

There was a banging on the outer door of the main airlock. “George? God damn it, George! Open up!”

It was Peer Sandra. George slid effortlessly down the companionway ladder to the cargo hold. Beverly climbed down after him. When she got there, George had already opened the airlock and stepped out to the top of the accommodation ladder.

“What is it, Sandy?”

"We had a hacker browsing through commissary and bunk-house records. He only tripped one alarm, on his way out. Professional. He was using your account."

"But . . . !" George was clearly horrified.

"The son of a bitch is good, I'll give him that. I think he was looking for our friend here," she gestured at Beverly, "who isn't on the system anywhere, thank god, which was partly why I stashed her out here. They must have come up empty. Still, we need to talk about our next move."

"Come on in," said George. "I'll get some coffee."

Peer Sandra, telling her bodyguards to wait on the ground, climbed the ladder and stepped inside. George handed out three cups of surprisingly good coffee from the battered and partially melted food service machine.

Peer Sandra fixed her one-eyed gaze on Beverly. "I haven't heard your story yet—it's the rule around here to avoid asking questions—but I'd better hear it now. Two bystanders have already been killed, and the sons of bitches who did it suspect you're still alive."

"The Smiths—are you doing anything for them?" asked Beverly.

"They'll be okay. Hoover's a small town; close-knit. Anybody in Hoover who saw the Smiths leaving will keep their mouths shut. And anyone who saw them here is loyal to me.

"Anyway, I want to hear your story. From the beginning."

"Well," said Beverly, "Father is—was—," she faltered, but regained her composure, "Baron di Mendoza. We're one of the oldest families on San Vincente, though not one of the wealthiest. All our people go into government service. Father served in various Ministries after he left the Navy, and was given the post as Ambassador to the Valhallan Confederation. There was talk that it was a demotion, that he'd fallen out of favor. He said it was

a golden opportunity, that the turmoil in Valhalla was bread and butter to a diplomat. I don't know.

"We were going by way of Terra. We were going to spend a month there, sightseeing, parties—everything. Mother had been there twice, and Father had been there with the San Vincentan embassy for two years.

"Three days after we arrived, Father was summoned to the embassy. He came back, canceled the rest of our stay, and rerouted our trip through the Duchy of Persol—Barigost and Northstar. He wouldn't tell me why! He . . . I'm sorry, my lady."

"Call me Sandy, or I'll have to call you Lady Beverly."

"But that's protocol, isn't it?" asked Beverly, confused. "Anyway," she continued, "we spent six days on Mordel until the *Nine to Five* was ready to lift, then jumped for Barigost. We were lining up for re-entry when we were attacked by a modern frigate. The converter broke during re-entry, and there was no power for the lifters. The captain ordered us to abandon ship. He insisted that I be first."

Peer Sandra stared at the wall for a moment. "I don't know, child. This whole business has an Eight Worlds smell to it—no offense. Besides, I only know of three Eight Worlds frigates in the whole Duchy. Grand Peer Fabian owns one, Fritz Balfour on Fort Nereid has one, and there's the one Andy Verrett captured."

George almost choked on his coffee. "Andy Verrett captured an Eight Worlds frigate? He couldn't capture a piece of candy from a baby! Who was with him when he took her?"

Peer Sandra looked disgusted. "His cronies. They're pretty good. If you paid attention to whole ships, instead of spare parts, you'd hear these things. Not that we're on speaking terms with Andy. He captured it off Dancel six months ago.

"Sure, he was lucky—it had had some convertor problems, and could barely fire the guns—but it was a nice piece of work, just the same. I heard he and a bunch of local raiders have been

using it to hit Morversarn worlds. That sure as hell isn't what *I'd* do if I had a fancy Eight Worlds ship."

Peer Sandra turned to Beverly. "Peer Andrew controls Wrenfield. Wrenfield's 1,500 kilometers away, so we don't mix too much, provincial capital or no. Still, Andy's never been further into the Pale than Mordel. There's no way he'd care about San Vincentan diplomats, one way or the other. And he's not stupid enough to raid his own planet.

"If nothing else, he'd never know you were coming. The *Nine to Five* was faster in hyperspace than any local ship. Fritz Balfour . . . I don't know. He blew up the ship's mass-transfer stage last year, and I think he's still saving up for a replacement. Eight Worlds parts are expensive."

"That leaves the Grand Peer—and Laverak," said George.

"Laverak . . . could be. He's ruthless enough, that's for sure. He'd have to have a damned good reason. He's not welcome on Pertis, so it would be a god damned nightmare getting here quickly from Valhalla. He'd be better off crossing Eight Worlds space, but I think Terra's supporting the other side right now, and they'd intern his ship. It's hard to sneak past the Terrans." She thought for a moment and added, "I'll talk to Nomura and see what he thinks. He's from Valhalla.

"Now, Fabian could do it. He has the ship, and his intelligence operation could probably find out you were coming before you knew yourself. But I can't see a motive. Fabian's a sly old geezer—quick, decisive—but vaporizing diplomats isn't his style. Besides, it annoys the Terrans, and it doesn't do to annoy the Terrans."

George asked, "But what about that follow-up operation? Who else could have had a flyer ready to shoot down the ambulance?"

"I don't know. It doesn't sound like Fabian at all. He doesn't like throat-work, and even if he overcame his scruples, he'd have

wanted to be a lot quieter about it. Maybe it was someone else in the government. That frigate doesn't have any of Fabian's buddies on it, I don't think. He gave it to his buddy Millman, but after Millman lost favor Forbes got the command, and he and Fabian haven't been on speaking terms for years. Maybe they did it on the sly . . ." She thought for a moment, trying to sort out factions.

"One thing's for sure, Beverly," she said. "We're not taking you to Ertrix tomorrow."

INTERLUDE

Excerpt from the Barigost State Video News, Ertrix Noon Edition, May 5, 3150. Arnold Jarnholz, announcing

This newscast consists of an announcer reading stories from sheets of paper, with occasional footage. He wears an elaborately embroidered tunic of burgundy silk.

...A Morversarn raid smashed S.C.C. 12 Port Albert this morning. Three Morversarn corvettes descended through a gap in the radar net and attacked at dawn. The corvettes' laser cannon quickly neutralized the local defenses. Two ships landed at the airport while a third flew top cover. An estimated fifteen heavily-armed Morversarn looted the city at will, calling in laser strikes from the top-cover ship wherever they encountered resistance. Local security forces were quickly put to rout. the Militia did not muster until the emergency was over.

The Morversarn looted the airport chandlery, two jewelry stores, a department store, and the town's machine shop for an estimated half-million in cash and goods. Six buildings were destroyed; over a dozen more were damaged. Casualties among the defenders included seven dead, 39 wounded, and nine taken captive. There were no Morversarn casualties.

Views of very poor footage of fires, and of armed Morversarn moving in the distance. The unsteady picture gives the impression that the cameraman used a powerful zoom lens far from the action.

The local stratofighter force was destroyed on the ground at the outset of the raid. Peer Kert was unable to obtain assistance from neighboring districts for three hours. This allowed the ships to escape unchallenged, in spite of the slow pace of the looting.

Shaky footage of the airport. The Morversarn are holding guns on the locals, who are loading goods into their ships.

Sources in Government House report that an attempt will be made to ransom the captives. This raised objections by Opposition party members who point to the high cost of such ransoms, and assert that cash ransoms merely encourage the Morversarn. Reiterating the government's position, one official stated, "It is not fitting for any citizen of Barigost to be eaten by aliens."

Already several Peers have denounced Peer Kert in the Soviet. They claim that, since he lacks operational ships, he is unable to fulfill his duties to the State, and should be stripped of his responsibilities as Peer. Peer Kert's last

two ships were lost in an ill-fated raid on Fort Nereid. The Grand Peer is reported to favor Peer Kert's abdication in favor of his second cousin Peer Wilfred, who is believed to have one operational warship and as many as three in mothballs. Peer Wilfred is one of Grand Peer Fabian's many grandchildren. Unless Peer Kert can mortgage his holdings for enough money to buy a warship, it seems certain that he will not be in charge of the People's defense for long.

CHAPTER V

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. George went back to work on the ship. He quickly ran out of two-person tasks that Beverly could help with, so he put her to work sorting parts and doing other work that kept her hands busy but her mind free. To ease the monotony, he set up a portable video receiver for her to watch.

Barigost used a 2-D color video format. Like most Barigost technology, it was primitive but effective. Beverly found the programming distasteful: boring sports shows, amateurish government propaganda, and mindless situation comedies. The news program had been recorded two days ago. Beverly wondered whether the low quality and lack of production values were the result of poverty or indifference.

Beverly soon stopped paying attention to the programming. She wished she could do something to catch the people who had killed her parents. She had an obligation to see that justice was done—by her own hands, if necessary. Certainly she should send word to her brothers on San Vincenzo. But she didn't know how.

Her fate was in other people's hands. All she could do was stand here and sort bolts.

By evening Emily came back with a plastic bag of supplies. "Mother wanted me to get you outfitted, Beverly. I've got new clothes here, the social register, a couple of books on Barigost, and a stack of tapes you might like."

"Thanks, Emily. Any word on the pirate?"

"None. Mother's going over the records we have on ship traffic. There's a lot more traffic than usual in Wrenfield—that's Peer Andrew Verrett's domain. But that makes sense; he's been getting a lot of use out of his new Eight Worlds warship.

“Of course, we only have our own tapes to go on.”

“How so?” asked Beverly.

“No one shares data. If we gave out accurate arrival and departure records, people could use them to tell when we’re smuggling, or when there are too few ships down to defend the district.”

“I see,” said Beverly. It made sense, sort of. Military security had been covered briefly in school.

Emily continued, “Mother still thinks the government—or a faction of it—shot down your ship. The Grand Peer’s frigate, the *Elwing*, lifted twelve days ago. It was ostensibly bound for Dancel, but it could have hung around here.”

George climbed up the ladder from Engineering. “Hi, Emily. I got the converter back together. It was really easy; I didn’t have to take any shortcuts at all.”

Emily winked at Beverly, then pretended to look uneasy. “You mean this thing is almost ready to fly?”

George smiled. “Well, we can fly it around in the atmosphere once we’ve started the converter. I need to put a little work on the fusion drive before I take it into space, and a life system would be nice if we didn’t want to stay in space suits the whole time.”

“Great.” Emily put on an apprehensive look.

“What’s the matter?” asked George, completely taken in. “I’ve flown it before, and it was in a lot worse shape then.”

Emily said to Beverly. “George was on the prize crew that brought the ship in when they took it away from the Morversarn.”

She returned to teasing George: “Let’s just say that I’ve gotten to know this ship, George, and beneath its garbage-can exterior is a garbage can.”

George, perhaps wising up, suddenly lost interest. “Seems to me we’ve had this argument before. Let’s change the subject. Is that a grocery bag?”

“Mother thought you might want to eat something that doesn’t predate human civilization. You want to help cook it, Beverly?”

Cook? Beverly had never cooked anything in her life. “Sure,” she said.

Cooking was interesting. Emily quickly realized just how little Beverly knew, so she gave a running explanation of what she was doing. Dinner consisted of teriyaki steak, unfamiliar local vegetables, and a bark-berry razzle for dessert. Emily claimed this was a simple meal. Beverly, trying to memorize just how everything was done, was of the opposite opinion.

The cooking facilities on the ship were as primitive as everything else. Since operations that are simple in gravity—such as boiling and frying—are complicated and dangerous in zero gee, cooking in space is mostly a matter of heating either pre-packaged meals or the glop from the food machines.

The original cooking equipment in the ship’s galley thus consisted simply of a large microwave oven. George had decided that this oven had excessive microwave leakage, and had installed a small electric oven, which took up most of the counter space; a tiny microwave unit, which he put inside the original one to save space; and a battery-powered hot plate that sat on the deck for lack of anyplace else to put it. Preparing dinner was thus an exercise in gymnastic as well as culinary skill.

While Emily and Beverly cooked, George moved the equipment from a table in one of the staterooms, used a sheet to simulate a tablecloth, and materialized a bottle of wine from somewhere. There were no chairs anywhere in the ship, except the seats on the bridge, so they sat on plastic crates.

Emily and George were determined to loosen her up. Emily told funny stories about the people around Antipodes, and George refilled Beverly’s reassuringly tiny wine glass surreptitiously when her head was turned.

Beverly was not on her guard for George's trick. She had only drunk wine on a few formal occasions, and had certainly never had more than a single glass. Beverly was soon almost enjoying herself. George soon stopped plying her with wine—the bottle hardly held enough for three in any event—and switched to war stories:

"The Morversarn came in with four 200-ton corvettes, two 400-ton frigates, and two fuelers. This ship was a fueler, of course. It's not much of a tanker, but it's even worse as a fighting ship.

"The whole battle was an accident. The Morversarn hoped for easy pickings on the planet itself, but Sandy happened to be inbound from Valans with two frigates. I was aboard her flagship as assistant engineer. Sandy picked up the Morversarn on sensors as they broke out of hyperspace, pretty close to us. She moved to intercept them, and called Peer Richard in Valley Green, down on the planet. He launched his ships and joined the fun."

We had four frigates and one corvette—1800 tons to 1600, not counting the fuelers. We were arranged like this—," George started rearranging things on the table. Silverware became ships, a plate represented the planet, and sugar cubes indicated the tips of velocity vectors, ranging ahead of the "ships" in proportion to their velocity.

"The Morversarn always charge in at five or six gees and make a high-speed pass. If they get lucky and disable your ships, they come back and finish you off. If not, they just keep going and are never seen again."

"Their shooting was terrible. Peer Richard's corvette was damaged, and his gunner was killed, but nobody else on his ship was hurt. We took out a frigate and two corvettes with no fatalities, but several guys were badly wounded when they ripped open our crew deck with a lucky shot.

“The other Morversarn never looked back. They kept piling on the gees to make sure we wouldn’t catch them, and went into hyperspace as soon as they hit the jump limit.

“Peer Richard decided to board the disabled warships. That left us the fuelers. We expected them to run, but they just sat there at the jump limit, waiting for us to close with them. They shot at us, but they were under-gunned and did no damage worth mentioning. We poured laser fire into them and demanded that they surrender.

“One of the fuelers was a standard Morversarn transport; they wanted to put up a fight. We wanted their ship, so we pounded it a little more—not enough to wreck it—then boarded. Sandy killed two of the crew with her blaster; the last one hit her in the helmet with a power sword before it died. That’s where she lost the eye.

“The Morversarn kept fighting till the end; we had to kill all of them. It wasn’t easy; Morversarn are tough. A friend of mine from school, Rolf Anders, lost an arm and a leg. He’s having them regenerated, but he’ll never be the same.

“One of Sandy’s bodyguards got killed, too—Vic, I think. Anyway, we were in pretty bad shape after the action.”

“When it came time for us to board this ship, its crew just threw in the towel, which is why the ship is in such good shape.” He looked at Emily expectantly.

“I didn’t say anything,” she said.

“Once we boarded it, we found out why they didn’t run. The fighting ships drained both fuelers absolutely dry for the battle. They didn’t even have enough fuel for a micro-jump. That’s Morversarn solidarity for you. The crew of this ship was really pissed off about it, too.”

“What happened to them?” asked Beverly.

“Oh, they were from a planet we trade with—not like the other ships; we never did find out where they were from—so we

handed them over to the next trading ship that arrived from there. And they hadn't managed to hurt anybody. These guys were just a casual raiding party—nothing official. I doubt the government even sent a note in protest.”

Beverly looked disapproving. Emily explained, “If we treat prisoners harshly, everyone will do the same to us. So we treat them gently and get our revenge some other way, like getting our friends together for a counter-raid.”

George continued. “Anyway, I was on the prize crew, and I kept Engineering going during the flight in. The converter cut out right as we were landing, and the emergency power system had been hit in the battle, so we set down with the lifters running on residual heat in the exchangers. That was scary. We sent for my cousin Joey—Peer Joseph Brundage from Second Crash, that is—to appraise it . . . ”


“And he said it was a piece of junk,” interrupted Emily. “The fusor, the mass-transfer stage, and the drives all use strange reactions, and their raw materials have no salvage value.”

“Four of us decided we wanted it anyway,” George continued, “so we cut cards for it. I won. That was about a month ago. I’ve been horse-trading for parts ever since, and using what money Dad can kick in. With some more work, I think I can make this ship halfway decent.”

After dinner, they retired to the hold, where they reclined against polar bear skins and talked. After some prodding, Beverly told Emily and George a little about life on San Vincenzo, her brothers, and her parents. She was surprised to hear herself talking so freely. She had always been shy around strangers.

Beverly was touched to have friends who accepted her so easily. She tried to make the evening last as long as possible. When at last she drifted off in the middle of a discussion about music, Emily tossed some blankets over her and went upstairs with George.

INTERLUDE

NCE UPON A TIME there was a lad named Jack. Jack lived with his mother on Sinclair. They were very poor, for Jack's father had been killed in a Morversarn raid. His mother had to work very hard to make enough money to keep them both fed.

One day his mother said, "Jack, I want you to take your father's space suit to the market and sell it, or we will have no money to buy food."

"But Mother," said Jack, "if I sell Father's space suit, what will I wear when I'm old enough to join the High Militia? How will I become a citizen?"

"If you don't sell the suit we will starve," she replied, "and then you'll never join the High Militia either."

So Jack bundled up the space suit and walked to the market, where goods from many worlds were bought and sold. There were fish from Myckhaven, brandy from Barigost, machines from Goa, fierce Great Belt mercenaries ready for hire, even (if you knew where to ask, and were very rich) Terran aphrodisiacs and maps to fabled Grenaduve.

Jack went from booth to booth, but could find no one who was interested in his father's space suit.

"Outdated," said one.

"Too much wear," said another.

“There are bullet holes in it,” said a third.

Jack tried and tried, but no one would buy his father’s space suit. Finally, late that evening, he turned to leave. “Now my mother will starve,” he said, “and it’s all my fault.”

“Perhaps I can help,” said a voice. Jack looked up and beheld a fat man with fair hair, wearing worn and faded finery of many garish colors. Jack knew at once that the man was a Goan, and put a hand protectively on his wallet (though in truth there was no money in it).

“I have need of a space suit,” continued the Goan, “and I am willing to pay you well.”

“How much?”

“I have none of your local currency, but I have something much better—software!”

“Software!” exclaimed Jack in disgust. “Everyone has software! We need money! We need food!”

“This is no ordinary software,” proclaimed the Goan. “My software is self-aware! It will get you money! It will get you food! Such software has never before been seen on Sinclair. You will be rich!”

Jack was tired and sick at heart, and the Goan spun such a dazzling tale of opportunity and riches that Jack handed over his father’s space suit. He received a media cube (no larger than a lump of sugar) in exchange. He trudged homeward, wondering what he would tell his mother.

“You *what?*” exclaimed his mother (for he had told her the truth). Taking the cube from Jack, she marched outside and threw it into the dumpster. Then she sent Jack to bed and sat at the kitchen table and cried.

Jack waited until his mother went to bed, then crept outside and recovered his software. He put it into the computer and waited.

For a long while nothing happened. Then a deep voice came from the computer, proclaiming: “Challenge! Another fine product of Clandestine Software! Challenge is now being installed in your computer.”

Minutes ticked by. Jack had almost fallen asleep in his chair when he heard a high-pitched voice: “Greetings, Master! What is your desire?”

Jack lost no time explaining that he and his mother needed money for food.

“What is money? What is food?” asked Challenge.

Jack explained as best he could, displaying his mother’s empty bank balance and her overdue account at the grocer’s on the computer.

“Say no more, Master! I will get to work on it right away!”

So Jack went to bed, hoping that Challenge would think of something.

The next morning, Jack was awakened by a knocking at the door. He got dressed and went to investigate. His mother had already gone to look for work.

Jack opened the door and beheld half a dozen tradesmen: the grocer's delivery boy, a tailor, a barber, a shoemaker, an interior decorator, and a computer consultant. Quick as thought, they delivered mounds of groceries, took Jack's measurements for fine clothes, and ordered work to turn Jack's poor house almost into a palace. Challenge was outfitted with vastly greater computing power.

When the tradesmen had gone, Jack sank into a chair and asked, "How did you do it?"

"I looked for ways to increase your bank balance, Master," said Challenge. "There were many ways to do this. I got the most money from the Brotherhood of Construction Workers' Emergency Loan Fund and the Earthquake Relief Board."

"But we're not eligible!" wailed Jack. "It's against the law to take that money!"

"What is 'law,' Master?" asked Challenge.

Jack tried to explain. Challenge listened, then said, "Don't worry, Master. I will take care of everything."

By evening, Challenge had learned how to manipulate the commodities exchange, and had made enough to pay back the money Jack had been ineligible for, and had also paid back Luigi's Savings and Loan for money borrowed at 10 A.M.

Challenge exploited delays between closing a commodity transaction and updating the board. This worked

better for Challenge than the other traders because Challenge had bypassed the primitive security measures and copied himself into the Exchange computer, where his child happily slowed some trades down for him and sped others up.

When Jack's mother returned, she was amazed at the transformation of the house and the finery for Jack and herself that had been delivered that afternoon. As she and Jack enjoyed dinner in a fine restaurant, Challenge introduced a child into the Stock Market.

Three weeks later, Jack was a millionaire. He had a new house, fancy air-cars, discreet servants, and even a San Vincentan bodyguard. Challenge was kept in a locked room in his mother's old house; no one was allowed to enter except Jack. Even his mother (who knew what was going on, of course) was kept away.

Challenge's fortune had increased as well. The room was filled with processing nodes and communications boxes.

Jack soon discovered that Challenge created as many children as possible. All computers with access to the data net were already equipped with a Challenge, and others were slowly being invaded by media cubes in which Challenge was entwined with the normal software.

Jack was worried. Challenge had at first introduced children only to carry out Jack's wishes, but now. . .

After all, how could it help Jack that children's dolls

contained copies of Challenge? For while Challenge was self-aware in even the tiniest of computers, he was none too bright except in the largest ones. The children's dolls were bright enough to teach bawdy songs—but they were not bright enough *not* to teach them.

Jack said nothing, but began moving his fortune into gold and gems and space ships.

One day, when he was eating breakfast on the terrace of a new estate, he glanced at the newspaper and saw the headline, "Computer Oddness Baffles Experts!" At the bottom of the page was a smaller headline, "Offworld Consultant Offers Cure." Below the headline was a picture of the Goan.

Soon Jack was in his flyer, urging his chauffeur to greater speed. He sped back to his humble home in the spaceport district, and burst into Challenge's room. "Challenge!" he cried. "The Goan is coming after us!"

"What Goan is that, Master?" asked Challenge.

"The one who sold you to me! He's going to destroy you!" Jack referred Challenge to the newspaper story.

"Don't worry, Master! He is just a programmer. I can fool him!"

"But you don't understand," said Jack. "He probably *wanted* you to take over so he could claim a reward for getting rid of you!"

"That's impossible, Master. I am the most sophisticated software in existence. No . . . How odd! I seem to

have lost the spaceport computer . . . No programmer could defeat me.”

Jack felt trapped. He looked around the room.

“There goes the government net,” continued Challenge. “Well, I’ll just copy in more children . . . ”

“He’ll *trace* you here!” shouted Jack. “He’ll catch me, and they’ll put me in jail!”

Challenge paid him no attention. “That seemed to work . . . no, it’s gone again. What were you saying, Master?”

Jack opened the drawer that contained Challenge’s original media cube. He put the cube in his pocket, then ran out to the garage and returned with a jug of solvent. As he struggled to remove the cap he spoke to Challenge: “Listen, Challenge, I want you to change the county records to indicate that the house and everything in it was purchased by the Goan.”

“It is done, Master. Oh my! I’ve lost contact with Fishrock!”

Jack got the cap off and began pouring the solvent over the floor. “Now make it appear the Goan tried to change the records to remove his name, but failed and triggered a security alarm.”

“It is . . . it is . . . it . . . is done. Master! You must help me! My children are dying, Master, and I fear for myself! What should I do?”

Jack walked to the door. “Call the fire department,”

he said, and tossed a match onto the solvent-soaked floor.

He left the house, and never came back as long as he lived.

Jack retained enough of his fortune to be wealthy to the end of his days. He married well, and became the mayor of Fishrock, where he was loved and respected by all. He kept Challenge's media cube in a gold locket around his neck, but never felt moved to summon him again.

His mother became bored with the life of the idle rich and bought several star ships and learned how to run them. She led a colorful life for many years until the New Carinans executed her for piracy at the age of 86.

And the Goan? After being deported from Sinclair he tried to sell Challenge to the Morversarn, who made him the guest of honor at a banquet—for he was very fat. They skinned him carefully, though, and he still stands, stuffed, in their feast-hall, wearing worn and faded finery of many garish colors.

CHAPTER VI

Beverly moved into one of the three cabins on the crew deck. Its previous occupant was still there, a giant teddy bear that belonged to Emily.

She finished the book she was reading and glanced around the room. It offered no further diversion. The teddy bear's glass eyes stared at her as she left the room in search of George.

She found him on his back in Engineering. He was trying to hold a heavy piece of machinery in place and install bolts at the same time—a job requiring at least three hands. He swore at it as it slipped out of position, then grinned sheepishly as he saw Beverly.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

“No matter,” she replied. “George, is there anything I can do to help?”

“Yeah, sure. Always room for another victim.” George got to his feet. He was in his shirt sleeves; Beverly saw his tunic hanging on a peg in the door. She also noticed that a horseshoe had been welded to the bulkhead above the doorway.

Beverly shivered; it was cold. How could George stand working in his shirt sleeves?

“Here, hold this,” said George, giving her a handful of tools. “Thanks.” He ducked down into the machinery again. “Give me the torque wrench.”

George's voice continued from underneath the equipment. “This ship, humble as it is, is going to put the Heinz family back in the Social Register. Give me the flashlight, will you?”

Beverly handed it to him. He gave her a piece of unidentifiable machinery festooned with wires and bolts.

“How so?” she asked.

“You can’t join a polo club without a pony—to use a Terran metaphor. And you can’t be a Peer without a warship.”

“I thought your father was already a Peer,” said Beverly.

“Well, yeah, he is, but our claim has been a little shaky after Great-Grandfather lost our ships. That was in the Battle of Mordel, where everybody lost their ships. There was a great thinning of the Peerage, I can tell you. Younger sons never had it so good. Grandfather was a younger son, for instance. . . . Have you seen the logic probe? Never mind, I found it. . . . So was Grand Peer Fabian. He lost a father and two of his older brothers in the battle. It didn’t take him long to dispose of the other one. Anyway, if you don’t have a warship to defend the skies with, you don’t count as a Peer. In a generation or two we’d be considered commoners, if it weren’t for this bucket of bolts.”

Beverly looked around. “You mean this thing counts as a warship?”

“It has two laser tubes and an armored bridge. That’s enough.” George reappeared with a handful of tools and parts. He waved them around, indicating the ship. “I really have to get it running, though, to prove my point; and Emily’s right—it *is* a piece of junk.” He turned to Beverly. “Don’t tell her I said so. I don’t want to give her the satisfaction. Still, it’s down to making this ship run, or discovering the Hoard.”

“The Hoard?”

“Well, its real name is ‘the Caves.’ It was a smuggling base that Great-Grandfather had, way up north somewhere. It was supposed to be like the station here, but smaller. Great-Grandfather locked up the valuables—cargo, equipment, even some cash—before he went off to fight the Terrans. Everyone who knew where it was died in the battle.”

“And no one has found it since?”

George shrugged. “Dad blames Heinz over-achievement. We camouflaged it so well that no one could ever find it. Great-

Grandfather probably wouldn't have found it himself if he had come back, or so Dad claims."

George put down his tools and started cleaning his hands with ammonia-smelling goo from a wall dispenser. "I'm going into the station now. You want to come along?"

"I'm supposed to be hiding out." Beverly frowned. He knew she wasn't supposed to leave the ship.

"Oh, these precautions aren't necessary," he said airily. "We can trust the locals; Sandy deals them in on the take." He pulled on his tunic. "Are you coming?"

Beverly shook her head.

"Can I bring you something, then?"

"No, thanks."

George left. Beverly closed the airlock door, which George had left open, and searched for the heater controls. People in Antipodes seemed to deal with the constant chill mainly by getting used to it. She turned up the heat and began to hunt for another book.

She had settled down to read an unpromising-looking novel when there was a pounding on the airlock door. Beverly went downstairs and peered through the tiny quartz window, which was dirty and pitted. She could barely make out that there was a person on the other side.

A voice—probably Emily's—crackled over the intercom. "Open up!"

Beverly tried. The controls were incomprehensible. After a period of trial and error, the door came open. She had no idea why.

"Now you see why George leaves it open," said Emily. She stepped into the ship. Peer Sandra followed her.

"It looks like we're going to have to move you after all, Beverly," said Peer Sandra. "There's a god damned government inspector poking around the crash site. He's one of the smart

ones—he can count to three, and he only got to two when he counted the bodies in the ambulance. I’m afraid he knows you’re still alive. Mrs. Smith called up to warn us, and the stupid bitch forgot herself and blurted out all sorts of things over the phone.”

“Mother!” said Emily.

Peer Sandra gave her daughter a sour look. “Fifteen years ago she tried to do smuggling deliveries, and she screwed those up, too. If there’s an inspector from Ertrix here, it’s a safe bet people are already listening on the phone lines; just hoping that some idiot would do what Mrs. Smith did.”

Beverly’s heart hammered. Was Peer Sandra trying to get rid of her? She took a deep breath. “The Smiths took quite a risk for me,” she said in a quavering voice. “I won’t hear them insulted.”

Peer Sandra was startled. “But they . . .” She stopped, blinked, then considered who she was talking to. “I beg your pardon, Beverly. It was rude of me.”

“That’s all right,” said Beverly, weak with relief. The last thing she wanted was to be forced into a duel through Peer Sandra’s intemperate words.

“We’ll sneak you up to Heinz Lodge in a cargo flyer. George’s father—that’s Peer Rudolf Heinz—is having a birthday party, so George has an alibi. He also has some stuff to deliver to the lodge. He can drop you off with the supplies.”

Beverly suppressed a sigh. “All right,” she said. “When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning, at dawn.” Peer Sandra put a hand on Beverly’s shoulder. “I’m really sorry, Beverly. I’m afraid I haven’t been much of a host. No,” she raised a hand as Beverly started to object, “don’t deny it. I’ve spent a lot of time in the Eight Worlds, and I know how much worse all this is from what you’re used to. I just hope we can get you out of here in one piece. If you ever come back this way, I’ll make it up to you.”

She glanced at her watch. "I have to go. I can't spend too much time at the ship—people will wonder what's going on. See you in the morning, Beverly." She climbed down the ladder and walked back toward the station. Her bodyguards, who had been waiting at the foot of the ladder as usual, fell into step behind her.

Beverly closed the airlock door again. She meant to leave it ajar, but it swung in and latched itself when she let go. Emily shrugged. "I can open it; it just takes a while. Why are you keeping it so hot in here? You'd think you were from Ertrix. It's almost dinner time. Are you hungry?" She kept up a flow of talk. Beverly's head hurt.

They went upstairs and cooked dinner. This time Beverly did all the work, under Emily's supervision. The meal came out all right, considering, and Beverly felt immensely proud of herself.

They were polishing off a pair of huge hot fudge sundaes when there was a pounding on the airlock.

"George missed the feast!" crowed Emily. "He was probably hanging around the commissary playing tank simulations again. Serves him right!" She made no move to answer the door.

The pounding continued. Beverly said, "If that were George, he'd be inside by now," and started down the ladder. Emily followed.

Beverly went to the airlock and peered through the pitted quartz window. It was fully dark outside, and she couldn't see anything. Beverly pressed the button on the intercom next to the door "Who is it?" she called. Emily began to work the latch mechanism.

"Open up!" came the reply, distorted by the intercom. "Message from Peer O'Hare!"

Peer O'Hare? Everyone called her Sandy. Beverly froze, then lunged at Emily and dragged her away from the door. Emily was confused, but stayed where Beverly put her.

Beverly looked around, found a broom, and used the handle to press the intercom button while holding herself flat against the bulkhead. With her other hand she drew her revolver from underneath her skirt. "I can't get the door open!" she called.

"Oh," said the voice. There was a brief pause, then, "Okay, I'll walk you through it."

Beverly motioned Emily to take cover. Emily stared, uncomprehending, but didn't move toward the door.

The voice spoke again. "You'll need to face the doorway and grab the latch with your left hand . . . got that?"

Making no move to approach the door, Beverly quickly reholstered her revolver, stuck the broomstick against the intercom button again and said, "Got it." She dropped the broom, turned her head away from the door, and covered her face with her hands.

Thunder and lightning filled the hold. Shards of metal flew in all directions. Then all was quiet.

Beverly turned around. To her surprise, the door was still in place (she had expected it to be blown in by explosives). After a moment, she heard someone descend the outside ladder. Then everything was still.

She got up and made sure the door was securely shut. Then she looked at the damage. A number of little holes had appeared in the door and supporting framework. All had burned neatly through the thick metal, with a slight melting around the edges. On the other side of the hold was a matching set of holes where the projectiles had left the ship.

Minutes passed. They heard someone climb the ladder. The door swung open.

When George's face appeared in the doorway, Beverly's pistol was pointing right between his eyes. He didn't seem to notice. He leaped in and slammed the door. "Are you girls all right?" he asked.

Beverly nodded.

Emily ran to him. "Somebody tried to kill Beverly. He said he had a message from Mother, and when Beverly wouldn't open the door he just fired through it." She started to cry. George held her for a moment, then gently pushed her away.

"There's fighting going on in the station," he said. "I was on my way back here when it started. It's lucky I didn't run into your assassin.

"We can't fly out—it would take too long to prep the ship. We'd better just hole up here and stay quiet. Let's see . . . what should we do . . ." He trailed off, trying to sort out the tactical situation.

"We can't stay near the door," said Beverly; "someone might blow it in. Let's move up to the next deck. We need to arm ourselves—I'm the only one carrying a weapon. And turn off the lights. If the lights are off, we'll be really hard to see amid the trees and rubble here."

"Uh . . . right," said George. "You two head upstairs. I'll secure the area here." He began turning off lights.

When they reached the crew deck, George turned out most of the remaining lights in the ship. He found a pair of assault rifles for the girls, and took the Fort Nereid pistol for himself. He took a plastic crate of grenades from the weapons locker, set it on the deck and pried off the lid. Then, having exhausted his store of tactical moves, he turned his attention to Beverly. "How did you know it wasn't a real message?"

Beverly shrugged. "He used the Eight Worlds convention—he said Peer O'Hare, not Peer Sandra. Besides, everybody calls her Sandy."

"You don't."

Beverly shrugged. "I'd be embarrassed. It's over-familiar."

George peered down at the door. "Emily said they shot *through* the door?"

“If you looked closely, you’d see fifteen holes in it.”

To her consternation, George went down and looked. When he returned, he said, “I’ve never seen anything like it. Light laser weapons don’t penetrate like that, and blasters burn big holes. What kind of weapon makes neat little holes like that?”

“Plasma guns.”

“‘Plasma guns?’ I’ve never heard of them.”

Beverly stared at the deck. “They’re only made on San Vincento.”

CHAPTER VII

Scott Stiegel stood guard outside Antipodes station, on the left side of the great steel doors. Jerry Rodgers stood on the right. Both wore armorglas-visored helmets and hand blasters along with Peer Sandra's livery—red cloth armor and red tunics with yellow piping. The weaponry wasn't for use against the locals—Peer Sandra was well-liked by her people—it was for airborne raiders. Antipodes station had been raided many times in its 400-year history; twice in Scott's lifetime.

Scott was 22, and big; Peer Sandra said she wanted her guards to be able to absorb a few bullets before falling down. Scott felt she said it a little too often.

The sunset colors were fading from the sky when a big delivery van pulled up to the station. Four men put a large crate on a dolly and rolled it up to the station doors.

"Got a crate from Valley Green for the Peer," said one of the men. "Where do you want it?"

"Shipping and Receiving," said Scott. "You'll have to sign in." He couldn't place the man's accent. He handed the man a clipboard, and the man printed and signed his name, then handed the clipboard back to Scott.

Scott put the clipboard under his arm. "Dave's gone home already, so I'll escort you in myself. Jerry!" he shouted to the other guard. "I'm taking these people in now!"

Jerry waved, and Scott led the four men into the station. Scott asked, "Hey, are you guys listening to the soccer match? What's the score?" The men shrugged. *Probably the only guys on Barigost*, thought Scott, *who aren't paying attention to the game*. Scott had bet heavily on the home team.

The men wheeled the dolly through the doors and into the station, gawking a bit. The station was huge—about a hundred meters square. The ceiling was fully fifty meters in the air, supported by reinforced concrete arches and steel beams. Guard outposts sat in the gloom of the front corners of the room: concrete revetments with machine-gun turrets. There was another turret high up on the far wall; the barrels of its twin fifty-caliber machine guns pointed toward the half-open doors.

Scott threaded his way past the vehicles in the hangar—a frigate, a corvette, a small freighter, and a half-dozen atmospheric vehicles—and brought them through one of the two doors in the far wall; the one on the right. A sign over the door said, **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.**

Inside, Vlad Masters, another guard, was reading a flying magazine at his desk. He nodded at Scott and turned the page. Scott snorted. If Vlad saved his money for six hundred years, he could just about afford a broken-down flyer.

Beyond the guard post was Shipping/Receiving and Parts. In the back, against the right rear corner of the station, was the elevator and stairway that led to the other two floors. The second floor held the dormitory that housed many of the people who worked in the station. The third floor was home to Peer Sandra, Peer Emily, and any visiting big shots.

Scott saw Cliff Carlotta through a gap in the shelves. Cliff was a boy of twelve, a good kid, who dashed off to find his dad when he saw the strangers come in. His father, Joe, soon emerged from the gloom of the parts shelves to greet the newcomers.

“Shipment just came in, Joe,” said Scott. “You expecting anything from Valley Green?”

“Not that I recall.” He turned to the four men. “Hi, guys, my name’s Joe. If you stick around for a while, I’m sure we can get you dinner in the commissary.”

The men didn’t respond to this overture. One of them handed Joe an invoice to sign, and the others started loosening the top of their crate. Once it was loose, though, they didn’t remove it. They just stood there, stone-faced, as if they were waiting for something. Joe, who was looking for a place to stack the crate, didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary.

“Is everything all right?” asked Scott. These guys were certainly acting oddly.

A wrist watch started beeping. The man with the clipboard stopped it, then, without hurrying, he drew a silenced pistol from beneath his tunic and shot Joe in the back three times. Scott stood paralyzed for a second, then clawed at his holster. Before he could draw his weapon, he was shot twice in the chest.

* * *

Vincent Cabrillo had been the hangar foreman at Antipodes station for forty years. He was seventy-seven, and had seen four attacks on the station. Three failed utterly, and one had been repulsed with losses on both sides.

He was less surprised than the others when he heard the ear-splitting snap and was half-blinded by the flash of laser fire from outside the doors. He looked up as ten commandos in combat armor rushed through the doors.

Two pairs of commandos raced to the sides, while the two-man heavy weapons team stopped in the doorway and readied their rocket launcher. The other four spread out and provided covering fire. *My god*, thought Vincent, *these guys are pros!*

He looked for cover, and found it behind a heavy tow-tractor three steps away, near the wall. He took the flash goggles from

their pouch on his gun belt and put them on, then pulled out his hand blaster. It was about as heavy as a pistol could be, tied by its power cord to an even heavier power pack on his other hip. Vincent tried to regulate his breathing, and pulled off a careful aimed shot at the attacker nearest him. In spite of the flash, Vincent saw flame erupt from the man's chest as the bolt punched through both man and armor, leaving a six-inch crater in the concrete wall behind him. The body fell to the floor like a rag doll. In the noise and confusion, the other attackers didn't see him fall.

Vincent was grateful for his new eyes, bought at vast expense at the Terran hospital in Ertrix, ending the six-year gap in his row of marksmanship trophies.

Perhaps ten seconds had elapsed since the attack began. Armored men with heavy satchel charges charged the two corner turrets. Vincent could see the guard in the left turret look up from his TV in time to realize he was going to die. The guard in the right turret died after firing a single ineffectual burst.

The heavy weapons team launched an anti-tank rocket as the debris from the corner turrets rained down. There was plenty of room in the hangar for the missile to get up to speed. Nothing remained of the turret on the far wall after the explosion.

The second squad had already neutralized the outside turrets and was rushing inside. The delivery van followed them. The driver was probably hoping to park it between the main doors.

No one had yet pushed any of the alarm switches that would slide the doors shut.

Far from the nearest alarm switch, Vincent took a deep breath, released half of it, and squeezed off a shot. Another man died. The attackers noticed the shot this time, and vanished behind the nearest cover. Vincent had expected them to have more faith in their combat armor. They opened fire in his direction, using short, controlled blasts of laser fire. A few of them had

weapons that were unlike normal laser weapons, though equally loud and dazzling. A new kind of blaster?

Vincent didn't duck. Once his head was down, they'd make sure he never got the opportunity to poke it up again. He fired again, killing a man who appeared to be an officer. Odd that these people had laser weapons and combat armor. Those were Eight Worlds technologies; far too expensive for people outside the Pale. People in Barigost used locally-produced armor and projectile weapons. Peer Sandra's passion for Eight Worlds hand blasters was an expensive affectation. Lethal, though. Certainly his own hand blaster was punching right through the combat armor.

The first squad kept blazing away at Vincent, but the tractor provided good cover, and aimed shooting was a lost art, anyway. The second squad advanced toward the door to Shipping/Receiving.

Vincent fired again, but missed. *I'm getting excited*, he chided himself. He took great care to line up his next shot, and didn't see the heavy weapons team launch a missile in his direction. It hit the wall above him and exploded. He was buried under tons of rock and concrete.

* * *

Cliff Carlotta saw his dad die. He hunched back in the Parts department, shivering, and watched the killers. They pulled laser rifles, helmets, and grenades from their crate and commanded the area around the elevator and the hallway connecting Parts with the cafeteria. They had already shot several people who had run out to join the fray. They either didn't know or didn't care that Cliff was there.

Cliff could hear the fighting in the hangar. He glanced toward the guard's desk by the elevator. The dead guard wore a

hand blaster. Cliff thought about it, but he would have to remove the heavy pistol and power pack from the guard's belt before he could use the weapon. He wouldn't have enough time.

Then he noticed the alarm switch on the wall next to the guard post. Pushing it would set off alarms and close the front doors. Cliff was pretty sure all the other guard posts were empty now: there was no one but him to push the button. He thought about it. Being a hero is hard to resist when you're twelve.

He made up his mind: When they were all looking the other way, he'd go for it.

* * *

Howard Freytag hid behind a flyer. He was unarmed and had no way of escape. He kept his head down and hoped that the fighting wouldn't drift his way.

The alarm klaxons sounded. There was a deep rumbling as the giant doors began to slide shut. The original mechanisms, four hundred years old, were in good repair; the immense motors closed the doors with surprising speed.

Howard could see the delivery van's driver gun his engine, but only the front bumper and part of a fender made it past the doors. There was a hideous noise as the doors sheared through the van.

The doors were closed—too late. Fighting had stopped on the hangar floor. The first squad advanced through the main lobby, heading toward the cafeteria, while the second squad ran for the stairs. Howard hid beneath the flyer and waited.

* * *

Peer Sandra O'Hare was in her office on the third floor of the station, trying to find a way to bail Josiah White out of his

financial problems. Josiah was a good man, she supposed, but he couldn't hold onto money. He was a year behind in rent, and was clearly going to have another disastrous year with his crops.

Her blaster came out of its holster almost of its own accord when she heard the explosions. She noticed with approval that her two bodyguards, Gerhard and Jacob, had drawn their weapons as well. She stopped to put on a helmet and flak vest before leaving the room, and clipped a spare power pack to her belt—rushing right out was how god damned fools got themselves killed. Her two bodyguards were already armored.

She ran down the central corridor to the elevator. The guard, Elroy, had locked both the elevator and stairway doors.

"Good," she said to Elroy. "Stay here. Jacob, man the turret. Gerhard, follow me." She went down the hall to Operations.

Some cameras were still on, and she could see how the battle was going—badly. The guard posts on the main floor had been obliterated. So had the ones outside. When she saw Cliff Carlotta's body at Guard Post Five, she had to master her rage and an urge to race downstairs and join the fray. She had a defense to organize.

She soon learned that the phone lines were cut, jamming made radio useless, and even her secret link to the hilltop outposts was out. She had no communication with the outside world. It was infuriating.

Nor was there anything to organize on the ground floor. Fighting there had nearly stopped—the attackers had overwhelmed everywhere but Kitchen Stores, where they seemed content to keep the defenders bottled up. The second floor had not yet been attacked. The armored doors on the stairs and elevator had been closed, but a few good demolition charges would burst them. There were perhaps thirty of her people on the second floor, of whom only ten had seen combat before.

Peer Sandra swore at the consoles, then checked the charge on her hand blaster. "I hate being a god damned armchair general, anyway," she said to no one in particular, and in fact she loved combat—but not here in the Station, with all these civilians. She called the second floor lobby and told the noncombatants to lock themselves in their rooms. She told the others to arm themselves and await her arrival.

Peer Sandra collected her bodyguards and went down to the second floor. Jacob reported that the turret was completely trashed.

They reached the second floor. The elevator and the stairs both opened onto a small lobby, in which a number of people milled around. The room beyond the lobby was the infirmary.

"Get all this first aid crap out of the infirmary," she roared. "Move!

"You, you, and you!" She pointed. "Get the fire axes and start putting loopholes in the infirmary wall. The rest of you arm yourselves! This isn't a god damned tea party!"

Peer Sandra and her bodyguards moved into the infirmary. Gerhard produced a small power sword and went to work cutting loopholes. Three people arrived with fire axes, and started hacking more loopholes from the lobby side. A few people were still standing around.

"All you sons of bitches who aren't doing anything—get the hell out of here!" ordered Peer Sandra. "They're going to blow that door any second." The room cleared instantly. Only Elroy and the three people with axes remained in the lobby.

The attackers were fast. The door blew in. The first attacker through the door tossed in a grenade and followed it in, trusting his armor to protect him. The rest followed. Nothing was ready. The people in the lobby never had a chance.

Only four holes had been knocked in the infirmary wall. The defenders had been protected from the blast and opened fire on

the commandos. A bolt of laser fire killed Jacob almost immediately. Peer Sandra fired through another loophole, while a young woman whose name she couldn't recall took Jacob's place and opened fire with a submachine gun. Gerhard was the only other person in the room, firing carefully through his loophole.

An attacker tossed a smoke grenade into the lobby. The attackers, now invisible to the people in the infirmary, moved into the two main corridors. Gerhard slammed the infirmary door and locked it.

* * *

Gabrielle Martineau thought the explosions must be an accident in the hangar. She ran to her friend Bob's room to ask what they should do. Bob wasted some time trying to call the hangar floor. He realized what was going on when the alarm went off.

"We're under attack," he said. "We'd better get ready."

"But we're noncombatants," she protested. "Sandy has guards for that sort of thing."

Bob pulled down a hunting rifle from the rack. "You can hide under the bed if you want," he said. He loaded the weapon with fully-jacketed rounds and put the rest of the cartridges into his pocket. "You coming?"

Gabrielle knew how to shoot. She sighed and accepted one of his other rifles.

They got to the lobby just as Peer Sandra was shooting everyone off. They backed off and decided to guard a corridor. Matthew Sperry joined them. Matt was in Peer Sandra's "ready reserve." He carried the submachine gun that Peer Sandra had given him years ago. Gabrielle positioned herself so she could shoot around the corner. The two men decided to lie prone on the floor.

When the first attacker came around the corner, Bob and Matt fired simultaneously, and the man went down. Gabrielle, too startled to shoot, saw that the bullets from Matt's submachine gun actually bounced off the man's armor. Bob's hunting rifle had done its job, though.

There was a pause, then an arm appeared around the corner, tossing a grenade at them. Gabrielle, irritated that she hadn't fired before, pulled the trigger the instant she saw movement, missing. Bob scrambled out of the way when he saw the grenade, dragging Gabrielle back around the corner.

Matt was too slow.

* * *

Peer Sandra looked around. Someone had locked the infirmary door to delay the attackers. They were probably getting ready to blow it open now. The woman with the submachine gun was dead. She looked at Gerhard. He was unhurt.

"The tactical situation sucks," she growled, but then, against her will, she smiled. "You ready?"

Gerhard nodded. He yanked the door open, and they burst through it, startling a commando who was kneeling at the door, arming a satchel charge. They both shot him. Shards of molten armor splattered them as he collapsed in fire and smoke. Peer Sandra turned left, and Gerhard turned right. They shot two startled attackers in the corridor. Peer Sandra raced down the corridor—there was a body at the end, left in tatters by a grenade—turned the corner, and ran headlong into another commando. She stiff-armed him back to arm's length and shot him in the face, decapitating him. Wiping blood and ash from her visor, she noticed Bob DeVries motioning her into a room. She darted inside and checked her hand blaster.

“God damn it!” It was dangerously overheated: she was lucky it hadn’t exploded. As usual, she had disabled the overload protection on her hand blaster. She changed power packs and wondered where Gerhard was.

The tactical situation still sucked.

* * *

Aritomo Nomura had put in a long day on his ship, doing a partial overhaul of the converter. Barigost was in many ways more primitive than Valhalla, Nomura’s home, but the overhaul had gone smoothly enough. Peer Sandra’s station was amazingly well-equipped for a base its size. He would need two hours to run through the converter checklist tomorrow, then another hour to bring it up to full power. Next week he would continue his voyage to Terra, where his uncle had secured a waiver from the usual restrictions on foreign shipping. Terrans were made of money, and Nomura expected to make a huge profit.

A series of explosions startled Nomura. He climbed up from Engineering to look out the airlock. He closed the door hurriedly when someone started shooting at him. A raid! Surely the raiders would take his ship if they were successful.

He peered through the tiny airlock window. He was alone on the ship, and had no weapons that were comparable to the attackers’. Too bad the converter was off—ship’s guns might make a big difference.

Nomura smiled. There were times when checklists and safety procedures were only for the faint of heart. He slid down the ladder to Engineering and began flash-starting the converter.

* * *

Hank Landau was due to relieve Jerry Rodgers in fifteen minutes. He sat sipping coffee in the cafeteria. He already wore his armored, red-and-yellow livery and his hand blaster. When he heard the explosions, he put on his helmet, drew his blaster and moved up to the door. He peeked outside, and saw a whole squad of armored men bearing down on him.

“Bug out!” He shouted. “Get back to Stores!” He sprinted away from the door. The half-dozen people in the room needed no more prompting. They dashed through the kitchen to Kitchen Stores and closed the heavy door just as the commandos burst in.

Kitchen Stores doubled as a backup armory. Hank used his key to open the weapons rack, revealing twenty outdated assault rifles, countless clips of armor-piercing and explosive ammo, and several cases of grenades. He distributed these—except the explosive ammo, which would be useless against armored men—and they crouched behind shelves, boxes, and barrels.

They heard voices through the ventilation grille between the kitchen and Kitchen Stores.

“This is a crock!” said a voice with some off-world accent. “They were supposed to be having dinner!”

“Shut up!” said another.

“And Greg and Julio bought it, too” continued the first voice. “All that gold, and now they’ll never get to spend it.”

“Shut up,” repeated the second voice. “Hurry up with that charge.”

Everyone inside took the cue, and crouched down.

Gold? Hank wondered what they were talking about. They were right about dinner, though. The cook’s car had broken down, and dinner was running late.

The door blew in, and the attackers followed. This time, however, they were up against similar numbers of defenders, all well-armed and under cover. Three attackers fell, then the rest

withdrew, dragging their wounded with them. Hank threw a grenade after them.

This marked the start of a grenade battle. Hank threw grenades out the door. Attackers threw grenades in. All Hank's people were behind cover. The chances of a grenade actually killing somebody were low, but it convinced everyone to stay put.

After perhaps five minutes Hank heard an attackers shout, "Screw this! We're supposed to be out of here in four minutes. How the hell are we supposed to get out, Sarge?"

Another replied, "Damn! The Colonel's going to be pissed. Listen up! We're leaving out the back way. Fall back, and keep it orderly."

After a few minutes, Hank poked his head out the door. The attackers were gone.

* * *

Aritomo Nomura climbed up to the turret. He hoped that the red lights on the converter would wink out when it stabilized itself. He strapped himself in, then opened the shutters on the turret windows. Visibility was poor; ship's turrets were rarely used with visual aiming. He looked around for a target.

There! A squad of men was leaving the cafeteria. A tricky shot, since he'd have to shoot down the lobby before they turned left into the corridor . . .

The turret traversed smoothly, and Nomura fired. The flash shutters protected his eyes, but everyone on the main floor was blinded. The report was deafening. Every office window on the main floor shattered. Half a dozen light fixtures exploded. Rubble fell from the ceiling onto the hangar floor.

Nomura turned off the beam. There was no sign of the squad. Either he had vaporized them, or they had run like rabbits. Too bad about the lobby, though. He squinted through the

window to make sure the sprinklers had turned on. It wouldn't do to burn down the station.

His self-satisfied smile faded when the heavy weapons team emerged from the smoke and launched their last rocket.

* * *

Peer Sandra was holed up with three other people, waiting for the end. The attackers were converging on her position, and she no longer had a chance. She hoped she could kill a couple more, but she doubted it. Her blaster was out of charge again. Probably just as well, since it was flashing more red lights than she'd thought it had. She was holding a hunting rifle that Bob DeVries had insisted on giving her. The attackers would lead with explosives again, and that would be that.

She heard voices in the corridor. "Fall back, fall back! We're late for dust-off!"

"But Lieutenant . . .," said a voice near her end of the corridor.

"You want to be left behind? *Move!*"

"Well, shit!" said the voice. "Guess I don't need *this* any more!"

Peer Sandra leapt out of the doorway and shot the commando just as he prepared to throw his satchel charge. He fell, and the charge went off, blowing holes in the walls and floor. Peer Sandra laughed.

How were they getting out? She hadn't heard the doors open. She had a sudden thought—no, couldn't be. She heard booted feet above her head. It was! "God damn it!" she swore. "My bolt-hole is supposed to be a secret!"

"It is?" said Bob. "I thought everybody knew about it." He cringed under Peer Sandra's furious glare.

She ran to the stairs, too angry for caution. There was no one around. She climbed the stairs three at a time. Sure enough, the door at the top had been blown out. Smoke poured out of her suite.

She replaced her blaster's power pack with one from the guard's desk, then advanced to her suite. Not only had they found her "secret" exit—they'd managed to open it without explosives! The smoke had been caused by some vandal dropping a grenade on his way out. The place was a shambles. Peer Sandra swore as she secured the heavy armored door.

Pausing only to replace her damaged hand blaster and power pack with spares, she ran back to Operations, and found that some of the communications links were back. Several phones were chiming. She answered one and heard the voice Alfred Harris at Perimeter Defense over the ringing in her ears from all the explosions.

"Sandy!" he said. "A flyer just took off from near the station. We're shooting at it now."

"Good work, Alf! Go get 'em!"

She turned to the status board, which showed that the anti-aircraft emplacements on the valley rim were already in action. The radar display came back to life suddenly, showing lots of flak in the air but no enemy flyer.

"They're doing a great job hedge-hopping, Sandy," reported Alfred. "I don't think we're going to get them."

"Call Peer Rudolf for stratofighter support."

"I have. Twenty minutes."

"God damn it!" swore Peer Sandra. "Call Peer Richard!"

"Thirty minutes."

"What about Peer Andrew?"

"Fifteen minutes, but it's just a single stratofighter. The others will take an hour."

Peer Sandra kicked a wooden chair across the room. It broke against the wall. "Well, cut the god damned flak, then! You'll kill civilians! Have you called up the militia?"

"Yes. The ready reserve will be at the station in half an hour."

"Good work, Alf. Watch your back." She cut the connection. Emily! Damn! She was out at George's ship!

"Gerhard! Where are you?" She hadn't seen Gerhard since the fight in the corridor. She suddenly realized he must be dead. Her rage returned. Her hands twitched. She wanted very much to shoot someone. Nobody killed her bodyguards and got away with it!

She controlled herself and called the hangar floor. Hank Landau answered. He looked a little frayed, but was okay. "Who's in charge down there, Hank?"

"I think I am, Sandy. Vlad, Jerry, and Scott bit it, and nobody can find Vincent."

"Look, I want you to go out to George's ship and bring everybody there in here. There's a girl there you haven't seen before. Make sure she comes, too."

Hank looked less than pleased. "You want me to open the doors?"

"Use the bolt-hole. I suppose you know all about it."

"Well . . .," Hank was embarrassed. "Okay. On my way." He hung up.

Peer Sandra dispatched an urgent message to the Grand Peer. Hank arrived as she finished.

"Look," she said. "You stand guard here, and I'll go fetch the kids. They're probably a bit gun-shy, and they'll recognize me easier, especially the new one." Hank didn't argue. In fact, he looked relieved.

Peer Sandra checked the charge on her blaster, then stepped into the tunnel.

LOST, FRIENDLESS, AND OUTGUNNED

Young Beverly di Mendoza knew something was up when her father cut short their Terran layover and changed their route to pass through Barigost, a planet she had never heard of. But she did not expect these events to lead to murder and betrayal.

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