

TAINED GOLD
[WORK IN PROGRESS, SAMPLE CHAPTERS]

a Novel by Robert Plamondon

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Tainted Gold
by Robert Plamondon

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PROLOGUE

Michael was careful to arrive early for his meeting with Baron di Roma, allowing ample time for the snarled traffic and difficult parking in this once-stylish section of the city. It was just as well, as the guards at the entrance didn't recognize him and wasted an inordinate amount of time verifying his identity and his appointment before escorting him up to the Baron's suite. In spite of the delay, he was five minutes early, and was gratified when the Baron's secretary ushered him into the inner office immediately.

Michael had not seen the office since the death of his grandfather, the Old Baron. The Young Baron (so called; he was over fifty), his uncle, had changed everything. The archaic, severe interior had vanished as utterly as the archaic, severe Old Baron. The Young Baron had given an interior decorator a free hand, and the room expressed the baron's public persona: steady, reliable, unambitious, none too intelligent. The reality was rather different. For all that he had hated his father, the Young Baron had more than a little of the old man's ruthless cleverness.

The Baron rose, smiling, and waved his young nephew to a seat. "I have a report to show you, Michael," he said. "I want to you to give me your professional opinion." He lifted a folder from the top of his desk and handed it to Michael.

Opening the folder, Michael saw a standard planetary survey report—the sort of thing he wrote himself in the course of his lonely work with the Interstellar Exploration Corps. It had, in

fact, been filed by a member of the IEC about fifteen years ago, though this particular survey had been funded by the Terran branch, not the San Vincentan.

He read the summary. The planet in question was a dismal, arid world on the Inward Frontier with no redeeming qualities other than a breathable atmosphere. A ruined Imperial research station was the sole landmark.

Flipping to the appendices, he noted that a number of standard procedures had been skimped or omitted entirely. This was not uncommon, but this survey had left out everything that could be left out, and then, for good measure, had left out some more. Michael suspected that some of the data that *was* there had been cribbed from an even older survey, now over fifty years old.

Michael was offended. Planetary surveys were the lifeblood of the IEC. The sort of negligence shown in this one was inexcusable.

He looked up and saw his uncle waiting eagerly for his verdict. "Sir, this is, without a doubt, the worst piece of work I have ever seen. I'd be reprimanded if I ever handed in a survey as dreadful as this one. Maybe demoted. Besides, it's old. The coordinates will have drifted by now. It should have been resurveyed years ago."

The Baron smiled tolerantly. "So that is your professional opinion?" he asked?

"It is."

"How much would you pay for such a report?"

Michael considered. "Its list price is perhaps ten thousand bezants, but I'd be embarrassed to charge that much. If I had to go to the planet for some reason...well, it really all depends on why I'd want to..." He stopped, struck by the implications. There was only one thing on the Inward Frontier that the Baron was looking for.

"Go on," urged the Baron.

Michael blurted, "This one's it, isn't it? You've found it! After all this time, you've found the planet!"

The Baron, gratified, leaned back in his chair. Instead of answering the question directly, he said, "Cadet Lady Beverly di Mendoza took advantage of an Academy holiday to visit the IEC office. She purchased a single report. What you see is a copy."

"Don't tell me you bribed an IEC member!" burst out Michael, stung.

The Baron made dismissive motions. "There's no reason for you to jump to such a conclusion. Our copy could have been obtained in a variety of ways. The person who provided it had my assurance of anonymity, of course.

Michael let it go. "Are you sure this is legitimate? She must understand the need for security. They say she's clever. It could be a ruse."

Di Roma smiled sadly. "She trusts the Interstellar Exploration Corps' well-deserved reputation for tomb-like discretion, and she seems completely unaware of our surveillance. But that's neither here nor there." He leaned forward eagerly. "Look at this report! The planet is close to Barigost, as one would expect. Ships land at the ruins of the research station from time to time, which is no doubt how your father learned about it in the first place. But, in spite of the occasional traffic, I don't suppose that it was so busy that he had any difficulty finding an idle hour in which to hide the Terran gold."

Michael still did not allow himself to believe the news. "So you think that's all there is to it? Take a ship to this worthless rock and stroll around some in picturesque ruins until we fall over the loot?"

"Yes," replied di Roma, quite serious. "That's what good intelligence work is all about. If you do your legwork properly, the end-game is often childishly simple. The only thing you need worry about is Baron di Vasco. He and his ship are still missing.

If he is still in the game, and not lying in some forgotten grave, his most likely base is Mordel. It would be best for you to avoid Mordel. He can't work the problem from this end, since his friends here on San Vincento are being monitored by the State Department, who want very much to hang him."

"What about Lady Beverly?"

"She's making preparations, but she has no ship and isn't looking for one. She would have enlisted the aid of her older brothers, but they both happened to receive extraordinarily desirable commissions far from home." He smiled. "That was a nice piece of work, if I do say so myself. Doing well by doing good. I think Lady Beverly going to throw in with those Barigost natives she thinks so much of. They can provide her with both ships and men, of a sort. I think she'll take a first-class ticket to Mordel and bring little more than herself, her bodyguard, a suitcase full of money, and that friend of hers. But she'll stay in the Naval Academy until the end of their term, and that's two months away. You and the treasure will be long gone by the time she links up with her barbarian friends."

"Being long gone isn't what I have in mind," replied Michael. "I intend to kill her."

Di Roma frowned. "Still? But you know perfectly well that it wasn't truly her fault."

"She's the one who pulled the trigger," said Michael. There was an awkward silence. He changed the subject. "Did you say she was bringing a friend?"

"Oh," said di Roma, "didn't I tell you about her? A fellow cadet from the Academy. They're roommates. She's the daughter of a scientist—military archaeologist. He's dead now, but she was with him on his last few digs. No doubt that will make her valuable on this trip."

Michael stiffened. "What's her name?"

"Elizabeth di Montari."

“You can’t be serious.”

“Surely you don’t know her?”

Michael hesitated, then said, “Yes. Yes, I do.”

Di Roma gazed intently at his nephew’s troubled face. Then, hesitantly, “Well, then, if you don’t mind my asking, what was the nature of your relationship?”

There was a stony silence. After a long moment di Roma sighed and said, “All the more reason to be gone by the time they arrive. Your ship should be ideal for the mission. Fast, anonymous, just the five of you. Will you be ready to lift soon?”

Michael nodded. “Three days.”

“Then let me implore you once more: at least defer your vengeance. Distant planets are no place for revenge. You place your companions and your mission too much at risk. These things are best done at home.”

Michael rose and bowed. “Sir, I will forget neither your kindness nor your counsel. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I will set about my preparations.”

Di Roma also rose and bowed. “Thank you, Michael. We will speak again before your ship lifts.”

MORDEL

Beverly di Mendoza stepped away from Mordel Spaceport's #2 Customs desk after having answered a few perfunctory questions. Mordel was an open port. The Terran colonial government, having no tax money at stake, had little enthusiasm for enforcing the planet's few import restrictions. The bored customs official had made no comment at the plasma pistol at Beverly's side. It was technically illegal, but the five-bezant fine was not worth collecting. Nor had her bags been examined. Had this been Terra itself, rather than a distant, impoverished protectorate, Beverly's sidearm would have been impounded and the very large quantity of untraceable cash in her possession might have caused her to be subjected to a lengthy interrogation, or worse. Mordel was most decidedly not Terra.

The spaceport concourse both reinforced and denied this impression. Dating back to Imperial times, the aged building had been restored after the Terrans had wrested Mordel from the Duchy of Persol. It was archaic, impressive, elegant, decidedly Terran, and far, far too big. The number of passengers stopping at Mordel was less a tenth the Imperial level, and one's initial impression of grandeur was quickly replaced by irritation. Everything was too far apart, and the renovation had stopped short of restoring the slideways of the original structure.

It was just after sunrise. Of the other two in Beverly's party, Briggs had gone to get the luggage and a rental car, while Elizabeth was still talking to the young man at the #1 Customs window. The two of them were smiling and rattling on like old friends. Thus, Beverly was the only one who marked the approach of Peer Sandra O'Hare.

Sandy came striding in, her two bodyguards hustling to keep up with her. She was a powerfully built, rather unattractive middle-aged woman with flaming red hair cut short and wearing, as usual, a faded flight suit in her family colors; red with yellow piping. Her bodyguards were resplendent in a livery which included garish yet businesslike flak jackets and helmets, also in red and yellow. All three wore hand blasters, with the heavy laser pistol on the right side of the gun belt and the even heavier power pack on the left. The three Barigosters contrasted sharply with the few locals in the concourse, none of whom were armed.

"Beverly!" Sandy called. She enfolded Beverly in a hug, then, grinning, she held her out at arm's length. "You've grown." It had been four years since they had last seen each other. Beverly had been fifteen, cast away on remote, backward Barigost when the ship in which she and her parents were passengers had been destroyed. She had been the only survivor.

"So have you, Sandy," replied Beverly. "You have twice as many eyes as you did the last time I saw you."

"That's right," Sandy laughed. "You left as soon as the fireworks died down. Well, I checked myself into the Embassy Hospital right after that. Got the eye regrown, took care of the scars, and even had the hair rejuvenated. Fabian kept on bitching and moaning on the cosmetic part until I caved in, the old hypocrite. He looks like a god damned gargoyle himself. But the new eye is good. It sees better than the other one, even, which is more that I expected."

Beverly smiled. Sandy would rather face a firing squad than admit to vanity about her appearance; nor was she likely to make any direct statement of her attachment to Grand Peer Fabian, Barigost's nominal head of state. "How is the Grand Peer?"

"Oh, Fabian's the same as always. It's everyone else that's slowing down. There was only one attempt on his life last year, can you believe it? He's getting so god damned ancient that people are deciding to wait him out. But he's still smart as a whip. That ambassador the Terrans fobbed off on us is as dumb as a sack of hammers, but Fabian still managed to grab an enormous pile of money for us in the settlement between San Vincenzo and Terra. Every worn-out piece of crap that di Cruz blew up got paid for as if it were brand-new Terran military issue. I couldn't *believe* how lucrative it was, what with the cost of goods on Terra and the exchange rates and all. But the San Vincentans were so numbed by the cost of replacing the gold that di Cruz stole that Fabian's bill looked like lunch money."

Elizabeth turned from the Customs desk and walked toward them, still smiling. She was an attractive young woman of eighteen. With her fair hair, dancing green eyes, and petite build, she looked decorative and fragile. In fact, she looked nothing like a cadet from the San Vincentan Naval Academy. She contrasted strongly with Beverly whose porcelain complexion, jet-black hair, aristocratic reserve, and almost undetectable air of menace could have made her the Academy poster girl. The impression was further reinforced by Beverly's tailored black flight suit and the plasma pistol on her left hip.

Beverly indicated Elizabeth and performed the introduction formally. "Sandy, I would like you to meet my close friend and companion, Elizabeth di Montari. Elizabeth, this is my friend and comrade, Peer Sandra O'Hare."

Elizabeth extended a hand, smiling up at Sandy. Sandy took in Elizabeth's slight form, attractiveness, fashionable clothes, lack of

armament, poised but unmilitary bearing, and open friendliness with disapproval. Beverly gave a sympathetic wince as Sandy took Elizabeth's hand, for Sandy habitually shook hands with bone-crushing firmness. But for some reason Sandy restrained herself and announced, "Any friend of Beverly's is a friend of mine. Call me Sandy. They call you Liz?"

Elizabeth's smile vanished. "Elizabeth," she said.

Just then one of Sandy's bodyguards said, "Trouble." Beverly saw Sandy turn, her right hand near, but not too near, her hand blaster, which, unlike those of her guards, was in a quick-draw holster.

Briggs was approaching. He was a big, middle-aged, grey-bearded man, radiating an alert intensity bordering on menace. His muscular arms were covered with tattoos. He wore a plasma pistol at his side, similar to Beverly's. Much smaller than a hand blaster, and without the heavy power pack, it was still the superior weapon. An electric luggage cart followed at his heels, piled high with suitcases. Two-thirds of these were shockproof, water-proof, almost bullet-proof expedition cases belonging to Elizabeth. Beverly had no idea what was in most of them. Only two of them held clothing.

Beverly watched Sandy size up the situation in an instant. As soon as Briggs came into range she stuck out her hand. "You must be Briggs," she said. "I'm Sandy."

Briggs' eyes had flicked from Sandy to her bodyguards, then to Beverly, who was smiling. He relaxed, the danger going out of his eyes. He shook Sandy's hand, returning her powerful grip with interest, and they grinned at each other; instant friends. "I'm honored to meet you, Peer Sandra," he said.

"Oh, knock off the respect crap and call me Sandy. I see you were in the Eighth Marine Commandos," she said, indicating one of his tattoos. "Were you on Reverse Draw? 'Cause I was: lance corporal in the Twenty-Third."

Beverly interrupted. "You were in the Goan Marines? I never knew that."

"Oh, sure," said Sandy. "I skipped away from home when I was seventeen. Dad had this idea that blowing people to hell wasn't ladylike, though I'd already been in action with Gramps a couple of times. I worked my way into Goan space and joined the navy, which was wide open back then. I was just a rating, but I started hanging around with some power-armor jocks, and pretty soon I got a chance to transfer into their unit. After a few years a buddy of mine and I built a suit of power armor out of condemned parts—he worked in the shop, and he condemned some pretty good stuff, I'll tell you—and we went free-lance. I was the muscle and he was the technician. But the market for free-lance power-armor is one god damned suicide mission after another, and anyway it wasn't the same after Hal got killed in that flyer accident." She paused, remembering her loss, long ago. "So, all in all, I was pretty happy to pack it in and take over the district when Dad died."

Briggs was listening with a sad smile on his face. Beverly, who had known him since she was little, knew what he was thinking: everyone who had ever used powered battle armor claimed to be happy to have packed it in, and every one of them was lying. He said, quietly, "Sure, I was on Reverse Draw, Sandy. Maybe you took a shot at me."

Sandy laughed. "Not hardly. The people I shot at are dead."

She turned to Beverly. "Come on. Let's get the hell out of here and find some breakfast. After that, let's go shopping."

"But you haven't been briefed yet," protested Beverly.

"Once I'm briefed it won't be shopping, it'll be outfitting," said Sandy. "Let's go on a spree before things get too damned serious. There are some great shops here on Mordel. You can find the weirdest things here. And I've got some money burning a hole in my pocket."

Beverly glanced at Elizabeth, who, predictably, was enchanted at the idea of an unstructured shopping free-for-all. “All right,” she said, “But let’s find a hotel and drop off our luggage first.”

“You can stay with me at the Persol Arms,” said Sandy. “I’ve got a suite big enough for all of us.”

Beverly was about to agree, but Elizabeth spoke. “Thank you, Peer Sandra, but we’re going to stay at the Majestic. It has the best security of any hotel on Mordel.”

“How do you know?” asked Beverly.

“Vincent told me,” she said, indicating the man at the Customs window. “Many of the rooms have Knox safes in them, and the place is built like a fortress. We need that kind of security. We should either stay in the Majestic or on Sandy’s ship.”

Sandy frowned but gave in. She told one of her bodyguards, “Hank, get on the horn and tell Wolfgang to check us out and move all our crap over to that prissy Terran place, the Majestic.” She took a moment to introduce everyone to her bodyguards, Hank and Reynard, adding, “You’ll meet the rest of the crew later. I’ve known all of them for years. You can’t do a mission like this without a hand-picked crew; not unless you’ve got a hankering to get shot in the back.” She looked around. “Everybody ready? Great. Let’s get the hell out of here.” They headed for the far-too-distant doors. The luggage cart followed them obediently.

MORDEL

Aaron Aguilar watched them leave, then took the phone out of his pocket and called his commander. “They just left Customs and are heading for their rental cars, sir. Di Mendoza has a big bodyguard with her, ex-commando, and a civilian girl who doesn’t look like a player. Peer Sandra has two bodyguards. They said they’re going to check into the Majestic.”

The voice on the other end said, “Damn! We were all set to ransack their suite in the Persol Arms. We’ll never be able to crack the Majestic. Look, we’re going to have to pick them up.”

“They said they were going to go shopping after breakfast, sir. I’ll get our ‘friends’ together. We ought to be able to follow them from the Majestic and set upon them when they reach a good spot.”

“Just remember,” said the voice, “No killing. We don’t know how much ever got written down. You can take out the bodyguards if you want, but the women must be preserved.”

“Don’t worry, sir,” said Aaron. “I’ll take care of it.”

MORDEL

“Here we are,” said Sandy. She had been to Mordel many times and knew the planet far better than anyone else present. She braked hard and stopped beside a parking space at the side of the road—a space too small for her battered rental van. She put the van into reverse and backed very slowly into the tiny, decrepit passenger car parked in the space behind them, shoving it back until she had enough room to park.

They stepped out into the chill morning air. All six of them were armed except Elizabeth, who carried nothing but a purse. Briggs, too, carried a bag: a large black satchel.

Beverly couldn’t resist checking the two vehicles. They seemed, well, *undamaged* was not a word that had applied to either vehicle for many years, but *unchanged*.

Elizabeth joined her. “Disgusting,” she said. “Is Sandy always like this?”

Beverly shook her head. “She’s showing off. Maybe some of it’s for Briggs, to show what a macho power-armor jock she is—not that he’ll appreciate it—but I think it’s mostly for you.”

“Me?”

Beverly thought a moment, then said, “I think Sandy feels like a country cousin when she’s with sophisticated people. Maybe

she overcompensates. On Barigost, she was especially obnoxious when there were courtiers from the capital around.”

Elizabeth made a face. “Well, I don’t suppose it can be helped. Let’s join the party.”

They were parked outside a nondescript, windowless rammed-earth building dating back to Imperial times. Like most worlds, Mordel had only a tiny fraction of its Imperial population, and its only spaceport city was more than half-deserted, with the bulk of its area being taken up with sprawling low-density slums, shantytowns, and warehouse districts, all taking advantage of the plentiful shelter of the long-neglected buildings.

This particular warehouse was several notches above average. The roof and walls were entirely intact. No forests had been allowed to spring up in this neighborhood, so it had been spared the root-cracked buildings and pavement so common in the worst parts of town. There were lights on inside. The road and sidewalks had been maintained. There were even a few forlorn shrubs putting in a pretense of landscaping. The front of this upscale building sported a large sign announcing, “Gary’s World of Guns. Buy, Sell, Trade.” Beneath this, a faded banner proclaimed, “Big Sale Today.”

They went through the doors. Inside, the combined showroom/warehouse went on and on. The first display they saw was a pyramid of large plastic crates, each holding twenty laser carbines. The pyramid was at least ten meters high. Beverly stopped a moment and began counting crates, wanting to know how many weapons were in this single display. Before she had really gotten started Elizabeth said, “Four thousand three hundred and forty, counting the open crate next to the bottom.”

Beverly turned and looked quizzically at Elizabeth, who was a merciless tease. Elizabeth was returning a tiny instrument to an inside pocket of her purse. She closed her purse, met Beverly’s gaze, and smiled. “Honest!”

Forklifts hummed along, moving plastic crates of arms and ammunition from one part of the warehouse to another. It was difficult to figure out which part of the warehouse held what kind of merchandise.

Sandy held out a hand and stepped in front of an oncoming forklift, which braked sharply to avoid hitting her. “Can we get a little service here?” she asked.

“Sure thing,” said the driver, a cheerful young man. “Let me put the forklift away and I’ll be right back.”

He was as good as his word, and was back in less than a minute. “How can I help you?” he asked.

Sandy turned to the others, “What’s your pleasure?” she asked.

Elizabeth said, “I’m looking for unusual artifacts, perhaps in the form of hand weapons—Imperial, alien, anything unusual.”

Beverly said, “I’d be interested in a plasma carbine and quite a lot of ammunition, if such things can be obtained this far from San Vincento.”

Sandy nodded and said, “That’ll do for a start. Then we can look at bigger ordinance—laser rifles, blasters, maybe some missile launchers. And explosives. And maybe some accessories, too. I busted my night-vision goggles all to hell a few months ago.”

“Very well,” said the young man. “The plasma guns are with the other esoteric weapons, so let’s start there.” He led them to a corner of the warehouse, where he passed a door marked, “Exotic Weapons.” A glass case displayed a variety of what appeared to be San Vincentan military-issue plasma weapons of varying sizes: pistol, carbine, rifle. There was even an vehicle-mounted 5mm plasma cannon sitting on the floor behind the case. The forklift driver handed them off to a clerk who was perhaps a year or two older. The two of them could have been brothers.

Beverly was astonished by the quantity and variety of plasma weapons. “How did these get here?” she wondered. “The export regulations are very strict.”

“Oh,” said the clerk, “don’t misunderstand. These are not San Vincentan military issue; they’re exact duplicates made on Sinclair.” He said the last word proudly; Sinclair, a fiercely independent world deep within Eight Worlds space, was famous for its high-quality weapons. Anything at all could be obtained there, it was said, for a price—including new copies of Imperial weapons for which the technology was supposedly lost. But plasma guns were a post-Imperial development; one of the few technologies that were clearly superior to those used by the Imperium. Their manufacture on Sinclair must have begun very recently. The clerk continued his sales pitch. “Plasma guns are beginning to have a very loyal following among the more demanding customers for their reliability, lethality, and extraordinary penetrating power.”

How do they compare to hand blasters?” asked Sandy, patting her holster affectionately.”

“Well,” said the clerk, “they both have the same purpose: in fact, they’re the only handguns with any chance of disabling someone in powered battle armor. More realistically, they’re the only two that give you a decent chance of disabling someone in combat armor. But the plasma gun is lighter, is less prone to overheating and breakdown, and has far more penetrating power than the hand blaster.”

“What’s the catch?” asked Sandy.

“The expense,” replied the clerk.

Sandy looked at the price tag on a plasma pistol. “This isn’t so bad,” she said. “It’s a god damned fortune, but so is a hand blaster.”

“Not the weapons themselves,” Beverly explained. “The ammunition.”

“For the pistol, three hundred bezants per clip,” stated the clerk. “For the larger weapons, it’s quite a bit more.”

Sandy was stunned. “God damn,” she said. “You could just about pay people to commit suicide for that. There’s a lot to be said for rechargeable power packs instead of whatever the hell it is that goes bang inside a plasma gun.”

“It’s a one-shot open-ended containment chamber that shoots an iron sliver out the aperture. The barrel’s a linear accelerator, also powered by the explosion,” said Beverly. “The forces turn the iron into a plasma before it leaves the barrel. And the prices here are low. I wonder if the ammunition is any good.” To the clerk she said, “Do you have a range?”

“In the basement,” said the clerk. “You’ll have to buy the ammunition first, of course, but your satisfaction is guaranteed.”

Beverly asked to see a couple of the plasma pistols, which she immediately field-stripped. “These are very good,” she said. “They have the correct armory markings and everything. There’s an additional proof-mark here,” she said, pointing. “It’s not legitimate; it must identify the true manufacturer. The fit and finish are excellent.” She deftly put the pistols back together. She picked one up and switched it to ‘Standby.’ “The readout seems identical to service issue.”

Briggs was indicating a 5mm plasma cannon and murmuring something to Sandy.

“Beats the hell out of me,” she said. Then, to the clerk, “Has anyone ever mounted one of those 5mm cannon on a suit of power armor?”

The clerk paused. “I doubt it,” he said. “It’s awfully big.”

“We’d probably be better off mounting multiple plasma carbines,” suggested Briggs. “Without the stock they wouldn’t be any longer than your forearm, so you could mount two or even three of them on each arm, with the muzzles a little behind the wrist, and interrupter switches to keep from blowing your fingers off if

you moved your hands while firing. They're doing something like that with current-issue suits on San Vincento, but we were still using laser weapons in my day. But, you know," he said, having a new idea," even if we can't mount the 5mm cannon on the suit itself, we could probably rework it so we could *carry* it, like a rifle."

Sandy looked at the cannon. "Still too big," she said. "It's load you down. What's the point of being in power armor if you aren't faster than the next guy? Anyway, you don't actually *have* a suit of power armor, do you?"

"No."

"Me, neither. Sold it for a half-interest in a ship, way back when."

In the meantime, Elizabeth had moved to a case marked, "Our Most Exotic Weapons." She pointed to one and asked the clerk, "What's this?"

The clerk smiled, "That's a sonic stunner, Miss."

"A sonic stunner? I've never heard of one before."

"They're made on Terra," said the clerk. He lifted out the stunner, which was an improbable-looking pistol with a flared trumpet-like muzzle. "They emit a blast of sound that will stun people who aren't wearing hearing protection. It has a variety of effects on other creatures and inanimate objects. It has some tendency to break glass."

Elizabeth looked dubious. "What do you want for it?"

"Four hundred and twenty-five bezants."

Elizabeth hesitated, but Sandy suddenly said, "We'll take half a dozen. Sounds like fun." She turned to her bodyguards and said, "We can play tag with them as a training exercise. We're all getting out of shape." Hank and Reynard did not look thrilled.

The clerk, sensing a quick follow-up sale, produced a grey, egg-like object. "In that case," he said, "how about a case of sonic

grenades? They work on the same principle as the stunner. And, unlike other grenades, these are reusable.”

Briggs muttered something almost inaudible, which Beverly had no trouble deciphering. She, too, had heard of the miserable reputation of sonic stunners and sonic grenades in actual field tests, where the universal use of helmets with built-in hearing protection made them useless. But Sandy bought two cases of twelve grenades with alacrity, seeing them as toys rather than as genuine military hardware. She read the instructions carefully and stuffed a couple of grenades into a pocket of her flight suit, then looked around, obviously tempted by the thought of trying one out on the spot. But she contained herself and went off to look at demolition charges.

Elizabeth looked over the other hand weapons. She was intrigued by the mechanism of a particularly well-designed rocket pistol, but, as it was of no conceivable use to her, didn't buy it. She became bored with the endless array of weapons and rejoined Beverly.

In the meantime Beverly and Briggs had selected an assortment of plasma weapons: pistols, carbines, and rifles, and had agreed upon how much ammunition to buy—a enormous amount. Because of the export restrictions, they had been unable to take anything but their personal sidearms, and had been afraid that they would have to settle for ordinary laser weapons for everything else. Seeing the size of the purchase, the clerk cheerfully agreed to allow a certain amount of test firing at no charge, and they all trooped down to the range. Satisfied, they went back upstairs to the cashier's desk. Briggs opened his satchel and counted out a seemingly endless stack of bundled plastic currency. The cashier fed the bundles into a money-counter and made out a receipt.

Little else at Gary's World of Guns struck their fancy. Elizabeth was fidgeting openly by the time Sandy bought a ton of

mixed demolition supplies and arranged to have it and their other purchases delivered to her ship.

“You can never have too much det cord or too many claymore mines,” Sandy said happily.

As they returned to the van, Sandy asked Elizabeth, “Are you interested in more miniature doo-dads for that purse of yours?”

Elizabeth smiled. “Indeed I am,” she said.

“Then I know just the place.”

The place turned out to be a shop called Pocket Rocket in the more affluent part of the spaceport district. It specialized in all things tiny, with an emphasis on miniaturized equipment. This being Mordel, many of the items on display were weapons. In addition to the ubiquitous derringers operating on various principles (there were cartridge derringers, laser derringers, and even a highly implausible rocket derringer for sale) there were electrified deathgrip gloves, switchblade needlers, pocket deathrods, power daggers, and minigrenades. On the defensive side, there were pocket flash/hearing protectors of an unusual design, small enough to carry around for use in the event of an impromptu street fight. Beverly already carried a similar device with her plasma pistol, but bought several of this new variety as well. There were many kinds of undersized night-vision and infrared goggles, and even a line of image-enhancing contact lenses. Various kinds of miniaturized or concealable armor were offered, from a combat helmet that folded up to billfold size to complete sets of concealable cloth armor.

There was a great deal of nonmilitary equipment as well. An almost infinite number of specialty pocket knives dominated an entire aisle. Ceramic-bladed power-knives seemed to be all the rage, though others included everything from navigation suites to electric drills. The trend was definitely toward knives with built-in high-density batteries and microminiaturized power tools. Other tiny offerings included cosmetics, camping equipment,

miniature wet bars, computers, sound systems, business gadgets, vehicles (the electric roller blades were among the least improbable offerings) and instrumentation.

Elizabeth was delighted. She wandered around the shop, often laughing when she found something particularly clever. She pressed a few items into Beverly's hands, and amassed an increasingly large collection for herself.

She gravitated toward a long glass case of instrumentation. Beverly followed, noting that Elizabeth had slowed and become serious. Elizabeth was fascinated by the concept of being prepared for any contingency by having a purse filled with a carefully selected array of tiny gadgets. While it was impossible to keep up with Elizabeth's gadget mania, Beverly was sure that Elizabeth's purse contained at least two weapons, an electronic telescope, a computer, a phone, a device for opening locks (which worked so well that she had stopped carrying keys), a toxicity probe that could be used to test food, drink, and air, a flashlight, a length of almost unbreakable cord, a tube of hyperglue, a first-aid kit, a rebreather mask, a ludicrously tiny travel kit, a navigational unit, a video camera, a microponcho, a blanket, a self-inflating pillow, a few conventional tools, a power knife, and perhaps even some tissues, makeup, and cash. For all this, Elizabeth's purse was of ordinary size, and it neither bulged nor clanked.

A display on top of the case caught Elizabeth's eye. "Ooh," she breathed. Then, louder, "Check this out, Bev." She held up a tiny metal object, barely larger than her thumb. "A micro plasma torch." She examined it, quickly figuring out how to extend the tube and turn on the flame. "We'll need eye protection, though—aha! Here we are." She pulled a little tab, and a tiny sheet of plastic pulled out. She shook it, and it almost magically unfolded itself many times into a filmy wraparound eye protector.

There were a few chunks of metal sitting in a sand-filled box next to the display. Elizabeth set one on top of the other, put on the eye protectors, and expertly welded the two pieces together. "This is nice," said Elizabeth. "Look at that seam. You can do quality work with a rig like this. I'll take it." She ended up buying three, giving one to Beverly.

Briggs noticed what they were doing and bought one, too. "Plasma torches are great," he said. "We used them a lot on Reverse Draw. We'd capture some of those Goan power-armor wimps and imprison them in their own suits. We'd just disconnect the batteries and weld the suit's wrists together. Easy as pie."

"I remember," said Sandy, not to be outdone. "We once raided your POW camp and had six guys operational in under five minutes. Most of your guys couldn't weld worth a damn. We'd hook the batteries back up, and damned if the guys couldn't break the welds just by flexing their muscles. We only had to unweld one of them. You'd have done just as well using string."

In the end, everybody got a micro plasma torch. Elizabeth demonstrated the trick to getting the eye protectors to snap back to their original shape so they could be put away.

She also found a small assortment of very odd instruments in a dusty corner of the case. She became fully alert. Beverly watched with interest; Elizabeth had a peculiar approach to antique machinery.

"May I look at these?" Elizabeth asked the shopkeeper. Most of the instruments were dull and pitted, as if they were very ancient. Elizabeth waited as the shopkeeper put them on the counter, then studied each in turn, not touching any of them. One of them made her shudder. "Put that one away, please," she told the shopkeeper.

After some time she finally touched one of the instruments with her fingertips. Then she picked it up and held it in her hand

for a long moment, her eyes closed. Finally, she opened her eyes and examined it minutely from all angles.

Sandy called the shopkeeper over to explain a gadget. Elizabeth held out the instrument to Beverly with a smile and asked, "What do you think?"

The instrument was about the size of a pack of cards, made out of a brushed silvery alloy. It had a small readout, an on/off switch, and three buttons. A flip-up panel revealed additional buttons in a tiny keypad. On the back side it had an Imperial eagle and a pair of numbers, presumably model number and serial number. The power switch was in the "On" position, but the readout was blank. Beverly switched it off, then on again. Nothing happened. She pressed the other buttons, also with no result.

"I give up," said Beverly.

"Good," said Elizabeth, glancing over at the shopkeeper, who was now talking to Briggs. She took the unit back from Beverly and turned her back for a few seconds. "Ha!" she said. She showed the unit to Beverly again. The readout was lit, listing several cryptic numbers and the word "Ready." Elizabeth pushed the button marked "?", and the readout changed to "No units within range."

"It's a locator/key for Imperial military wall safes," whispered Elizabeth, turning it off. Suddenly she grinned, delighted with herself and her find. "Let's see what they want for it." After a few false starts, she wiped the smile off her face and assumed a bored expression, then summoned the shopkeeper and asked him what the unit was.

"We have no idea," said the shopkeeper. "All of these units are completely dead, and we haven't been able to identify them. We're selling them mostly as knick-knacks to collectors. That one's in particularly good shape, and we're asking a hundred bezants for it."

“That’s ridiculous,” scoffed Elizabeth. “Space is full of broken Imperial stuff. I’ll give you thirty for it.” After a moment of ferocious haggling, they settled on fifty-five bezants. Elizabeth paid and put the device in her purse, her eyes dancing with suppressed glee.

In the meantime, Sandy had found a set of night-vision goggles that pleased her and had purchased an amazing number of other items, mostly to be divided among her ship’s crew or sent home as gifts. Briggs bought several of the high-tech combination knives. Sandy’s bodyguards bought nothing, and were visibly upset by the prices, which were shocking by the standards of impoverished Barigost. (Beverly had once been told that the hand blasters they carried were worth several years’ wages. Few people in this region of space could afford energy weapons.) Sandy had to badger them into choosing pocket knives for her to give them.

As they left Pocket Rocket, Sandy said, “I think we can hit one more shop before lunch. I want to look at vehicles and heavy weapons—Gary’s doesn’t have what I’m looking for. But I think that’d take too long and we’d be late for lunch. Anybody got any bright ideas?”

“If there’s an antique store specializing in Imperial military collectibles, we should visit it as soon as possible,” said Elizabeth firmly. “It could be important.”

“Hey! This is supposed to be a shopping spree, not a god-damned mission-outfitting expedition,” said Sandy. “But hell, let’s do it anyway. There’s a shop called the Midden that’s got all sorts of stuff. It’s not too far from here. And there’s a *great* restaurant in the same neighborhood somewhere.”

They drove off and soon reached a moderately well-maintained warehouse in a marginal part of the spaceport district. The Midden was the usual windowless warehouse, though it had been painted white instead of being allowed to remain in its natural earth tones. They parked by the side of the

road—this street was almost empty, so Sandy had no opportunity to repeat her parallel parking trick—and went inside.

A portly old man, a Terran, asked them what how he could be of service. Elizabeth took her computer from her purse and brought up a list. “I’m looking for these uniform accessories,” she said, smiling as she beamed the list to his computer. “I’d also like an appropriate laser pistol and holster—one of the later Kodaks, I think.”

The man smiled, “Genuine uniforms for reenactments and other hobbies are a specialty of ours. The laser pistol will present no difficulty. These accessories...they’re not from this sector. We will have only a few of them.” He did something on his computer and reported, “The helmet and belt we have, plus, as I said, the pistol and holster. The unit insignia would have to be ordered from off-planet. The acting Lieutenant’s insignia we have.” He paused, then said, “You know, an acting officer’s uniform is very likely not to have appropriate unit insignia in any event. Acting officers tend to rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of several units. Let’s look at the old service regulations.” He queried his computer. “Here we are. Yes, the key phrase ‘appropriate unit insignia, *if available*’ is in the description of the acting officer’s uniform. There is really quite a bit of latitude. You can omit the insignia without the least impropriety.”

There were a few more questions, the only one of note being as to whether Elizabeth wanted a fully functional pistol or one that simply looked complete (she wanted the functional one, though it cost over five times as much as a cosmetically perfect broken one, and indeed was more expensive than any modern handgun, while being markedly inferior to a plasma pistol), and he hurried off to pull the items from his shelves. “That will be sixty-three thousand two hundred and eighty-one bezants,” he said.

Elizabeth turned to Beverly. "Pay the man, Bev." Beverly, stunned by the price, nonetheless called Briggs over. Briggs opened his satchel and, with eloquent silence, counted out another enormous pile of bills. As he did so, Elizabeth said, "I'm all done." None of the others had seen anything they wanted to buy, so they decided that it was lunch time. As they filed out of the warehouse, Elizabeth was struck by an idea, and said, "I'll be right out, Bev; I just want to ask one more question." She turned around and went to look for the proprietor.

The rest continued out. Beverly noticed that a medium-sized delivery truck had parked about ten meters in front of their van. As Sandy reached the van and put her hand on the door handle, the rear door of the delivery truck suddenly rolled up, revealing a squad of men carrying assault rifles. They leapt out of the van and spread out in both directions. Remaining in the van was a fifty-caliber machine gun, its muzzle protruding through a slot in a thick metal plate running the width of the truck

An amplified voice called, "Drop your weapons!"

Beverly froze. She had not yet drawn her weapon, and certainly didn't want to do so only to drop it. She looked around. The men on the ground were punks, locals, who were carrying their new-looking fully automatic, cartridge-based rifles awkwardly, as if they weren't very familiar with them. They weren't likely to be very good fighters. But there were a dozen of them, their guns were leveled, and the machine gun would be a tough nut to crack.

Sandy, seemingly unimpressed, called out, "Who the hell's asking?"

There was a pause. Then a man stepped out of the cab of the truck, on the passenger side. He jumped down to the ground, leaving his door open, and walked toward them. Beverly knew instantly that he was San Vincentan, though he was wearing clothing and light body armor of local manufacture. She won-

dered if his light armor was a deliberate insult. It couldn't stop plasma fire. He spoke. "What difference does it make? We have the drop on you."

"I've still got my god damned pride," replied Sandy. "I'm an important person. I don't surrender to just anyone."

The man smiled. "Very well, My name is Aaron Aguilar, and I want very much to talk to you, Peer Sandra—and you, Lady Beverly. So if you'll come with us, no one will be hurt."

Beverly fixed his accent as that of East Refuge on San Vincento, middle-class, good school, some military service—he had probably been an officer. She focused her attention on the machine gun. The steel plate was nowhere near enough to stop the rounds from her plasma gun, though it was more than a match for a hand blaster. Could she and Briggs take out the unseen crew before being killed? She doubted it.

Sandy stalled. "Well, maybe we will, at that. What kind of guarantees can you give me? And just let my guys and Beverly's go; you don't need them for anything."

The San Vincentan considered. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a sudden whine of electric motors as his truck lurched into backwards motion. He had to leap aside as the truck swung around drunkenly, bumping over the curb and scattering half of the squad. Soon it had turned ninety degrees and the machine gun could no longer be brought to bear. The truck screeched to a halt, then surged forward, scattering the guards on the other side.

Sandy whipped out her hand blaster. With a blinding flash and a thunderous report, the powerful laser blasted a fist-sized hole through Aguilar's armor and body. The fireball billowing from his chest blew his unstrapped helmet from his head. His hair and clothing burst into flame. He was dead long before his burning body hit the ground.

Briggs drew his plasma gun and riddled a punk with a fifteen-round burst that flashed and roared like the end of the world. The impact knocked the body five meters back before it slumped to the ground, barely in one piece.

Beverly, a beat behind, drew her custom-built left-handed plasma pistol while whisking her flash-and-blast guard from her gun belt with her right hand. With a speed that came from endless practice with Briggs, she slapped the clingy, wraparound eye-and-ear protector into place just as her sights lined up on her target. She flipped the selector from “Standby” to the non-standard “3 Round Burst” setting and shot a man who was taking aim with his assault rifle, then shot a second man who was doing the same. Beverly’s flash protectors allowed her to shoot without even blinking. Her opponents had no such option. Unused to enemies with energy weapons, they had worn no protection at all. Blinking and squinting, they could barely see Beverly and her friends. One man, blinking rapidly, took aim. Beverly shot him. Her three-round bursts didn’t shred her targets the way Briggs’ fifteen-round bursts did, but they were just as dead.

The truck stopped again, then shifted once more into reverse. It trundled off backwards, toward the warehouse. Beverly shot a man who was cycling the bolt on his rifle—had he gone into action without a round in the chamber?—and noticed that the amount of laser fire was increasing. Sandy’s bodyguards had gotten into the act.

The remaining punks broke and ran. Beverly turned to see what was happening with the truck—a fifty-caliber machine gun, though primitive, was a formidable weapon. To her surprise, the truck had backed up all the way to the warehouse. The rear of the truck was pressed against a blank wall, trapping the machine gun crew inside.

Hank had stopped firing. He unbuckled his gun belt hastily and heaved it away, belt, power pack, and all, just as smoke and

flame began to envelope the pistol; a classic example of hand-blaster malfunction. The pistol turned white-hot and melted, then the power pack ignited and burned like a sun, sending sparks and jets of flame for several meters in all directions. Mercifully, it didn't explode. It soon died out, leaving a glowing, smoking crater in the pavement.

Sandy and Reynard sent a few more bolts after the fleeing punks, then advanced on the truck. Sandy stopped a couple of meters away, grinned, and blew a hole in the side of the truck with her hand blaster. Molten drops of sheet metal sprayed in all directions. Sandy stepped up and tossed something inside. A horrible noise started almost at once, followed by screams from those trapped within.

"God damn!" shouted Sandy joyously. "These sonic grenades really work!"

Beverly swung up into the cab. Elizabeth was behind the wheel, looking pale and unhappy. A man—probably the driver—was lying face-down in the passenger-side footwell.

"Is it over?" asked Elizabeth plaintively.

"I think so," said Beverly. The screams from the back of the truck had stopped; the occupants were presumably stunned. The sonic grenade had stopped as well. Beverly pointed to the unmoving driver, who had no obvious wounds. "What happened to him?"

Elizabeth looked searchingly into Beverly's face. Suddenly her eyes overflowed with tears. "I killed him," she sobbed. "I killed him."

4.

PLANET K117C

Michael looked through the navigation telescope at the ground below. The research station certainly looked deserted enough. No ships were on the oddly stained landing pad near the buildings.

This was a relief. He'd searched the IEC archives and discovered one other piece of information about planet K117c: it was used as a rendezvous for raiders and smugglers, and there was a Sarsi ship on the ground as often as not. The landing pad was reported to be intact and ample for half a dozen ships.

With the pad empty, Michael could perform his search in privacy. That was a mercy. But di Cruz, knowing about the stream of off-world visitors, would have hidden his treasure well.

"All right," he said. "Let's land on the pad. We know it's sound; people use it all the time."

"Aye-aye, sir," said his pilot, a rather elderly man named Ramirez. He adjusted the lifter throttles. The ship, a 200-ton tail-lander, assumed a nose-up position and descended toward the pad.

The crew was eager to be on solid ground and commence the hunt for the gold. Michael had been unwilling to conceal the purpose of the mission from them, a scruple that he now regretted. The crew's gold fever had made them resent the thoroughly professional and by-the-book approach he had made to the

planet, just as he had been taught in the Interstellar Exploration Corps' Academy. He had broken out of hyperspace far from the planet, beyond the range of any ground-based or orbiting break-out alarm. He had also arranged to arrive well above the ecliptic, so that his approach burn would be less likely to be detected. A slow approach, a careful survey, and a furtive re-entry burn capped off his efforts. Michael was pleased with himself, especially as the data he had collected had demonstrated conclusively that the IEC pilot who had last been here had been an incompetent hack. Some of the data he had reported had been little better than guesswork, and he had missed both the second Imperial installation and the sizeable native village.

Michael's crew, however, was not pleased, and Michael didn't really know what to do about them. The IEC Academy focused on the skills necessary to run single-man exploration ships or operate remote supply stations. Leadership training came much later, if at all. *Had grandfather not blocked my application to the Naval Academy, he thought grimly, I would be in much better shape.*

"Sir," reported Ramirez, looking at the view through the landing cameras. "There's a skull and crossbones painted on the pad. It's probably there to warn us off."

Michael took a look. It was there, all right. At this range, what he had at first taken for stains turned out to be the ancient symbol of poison and piracy. It went from one edge of the yellowish concrete pad to the other and had been painted with considerable flair.

Michael smiled, "Well, that explains why no other ships are down. Di Cruz must have painted it there to discourage visitors. It's a nice piece of misdirection."

Ramirez nodded. "That would be just like him, sir. Do I have to land right on top of it? There's a nice clear area over there,

running next to the stream.” He indicated the remains of a paved road some distance from the field.

“As you wish.” Michael was staring out the bridge window at the research station, an unprepossessing, almost windowless building up on the bluff. The pad was on lower ground, not far the tiny stream that passed for a river on this arid planet.

The ship settled gently onto the road on the far side of the stream. Ramirez eyed the readouts from the landing- jack sensors, but the roadbed held firm. He reduced throttle bit by bit. At last he decided that the ground was entirely firm, and he shut off the lifters entirely. “*Mandragora* landed at planet K117c at 1153, near Imperial research station TFBR3-3211,” he reported for the benefit of the ship’s log. Then, to Michael, “Shall I secure my station, sir?”

“Not yet,” said Michael. “Let’s keep things ready in case we need a quick getaway. Sandor, Marcos, let’s go outside and take a look around. Suitably armed and armored, of course.” He would have liked to take his engineer, Xavieros, as well, but he knew that Xavieros was probably already getting drunk, and would remain so until it was time to prep the ship for departure.

Michael wondered for the hundredth time how this crew had gained its reputation for being, well, certainly not first-rate, but thoroughly adequate. The pilot was a fussy, ineffectual old man; the engineer was a nasty, drunken sot who never bathed, the gunner, Marcos, was an out-and-out psychopath, and the navigator, Sandor, was a bootlicker. True, they knew their trades well enough, but they could hardly be called an effective team.

Michael’s father had used them only for courier and supply missions, and it was clear why. Perhaps he kept them out of consideration of past services.

Michael climbed out of his seat, squeezed past Ramirez, and climbed down the narrow companionway ladder to the cramped

little closet that served as their armory, overflowing with combat armor and weapons.

Sandor and Marcos were already there. Wordlessly, they prepared themselves, then Michael led the way to the airlock. He opened the door and pressed the button to extend the accommodation ladder.

The landscape was windswept and largely barren. A fringe of greenery hugged the banks of the tiny river, but plant life away from the water was sparse and dull-colored. Nothing moved. Michael's helmet readouts reported an outside temperature of 30 C. and 20% humidity.

They climbed down the ladder and walked around the pad, looking for anything that might be a threat. The area around the pad was clear for several hundred meters in every direction, except for the area near the river, which had very steep banks about five meters high. A person standing on the ground could be surprised by people sneaking up the river, but the view from the bridge windows and security cameras at the top of the ship, twenty meters off the ground, would reveal them everywhere except for a blind spot right next to the ship. Still, there was no way to get to the blind spot unobserved. Ramirez had oriented the ship so that the turret could sweep the river approach and the research station up on the bluff, leaving the belly of the ship pointing toward empty desert. Michael decided that Ramirez' fussiness had its redeeming qualities.

They opened up the hold and hoisted out the little armored jeepster, positioning it to cover the arc not swept by the ship's guns with its inadequate little auto-cannon. Marcos traversed the turret a few times to satisfy himself that the gun was still operational.

With only five people in the crew, Michael was not going to leave it manned, but would trust that the ship's alarms would give everyone time to man their stations.

“Let’s get out the refiner hose,” he said.

Marcos grumbled that it was Xavieros’ job, but the three of them unshipped the long yellow plastic hose and unrolled it toward the river. They attached the strainer on the end and threw it into the water. If all went well, the refiner would disassociate river water into liquid hydrogen at about a ton per day, providing the fuel for the fusor and reaction mass for the drives.

They went back inside. Xavieros, holding a bottle of brandy, had finished priming the refiner hose and was energizing the refiner itself. Michael told him to carry on, informed Ramirez that he should shut down his station and report to the armory, and went up to the bridge to check his notes.

When he came back down he told the crew, “It’s only about noon, local time, and we should take a preliminary look around the station now. It looks completely dead and deserted, so it should be no trouble. The loot will be hidden, of course, probably inside the station itself, but I expect that it’s marked in a way I’d recognize. I see no reason why we shouldn’t go at once. Xavieros, you stay here and stand guard. Put that bottle away until you’re off duty. The rest of you, arm yourselves for a more extended stay outside and come with me.” He had previously been carrying only a plasma pistol, though Sandor and Marcos were both carrying plasma rifles. He chose a plasma rifle for himself from the rack and clipped an ammo pouch onto his armor. Ramirez finished putting on his combat armor and took a plasma rifle as well. Marcos added more ammunition and a plasma pistol for himself. Sandor chose ammunition and a power sword.

They set off on foot, Michael in the lead. Xavieros climbed into the jeepster as a compromise between guarding the ship and being prepared to lend a hand if necessary.

Michael set a brisk pace. The remains of a road took them up the bluff, and soon they were in front of the research station. No sign or insignia remained on its facade; it presented the tired,

weather-beaten, generic look of practical, no-nonsense, neglected rammed-earth buildings throughout the Imperium. The hot, arid climate had been kind to this one; the roof was intact, and there was no vegetation ripping the building to pieces.

There were three steps up to the large double doorway. The doors were missing. They went inside, alert for trouble. Michael didn't have an officer's military training, but his crew did, and they deployed automatically.

The lobby was deserted, of course, and bare of furnishings. To the left, past a door hanging drunkenly from one hinge, was a stairway, with flights going both up and down. "Let's go down," said Michael. "I suspect they hid the loot at the lowest level, on general principles."

They went down, reaching first the basement, then the sub-basement. Surprisingly, the sub-basement had operational lights. Many were dim and orange, but they could see without their armor's amplified optics.

The sub-basement seemed to have been dug out of living rock, though the interior walls might have been rammed earth. It was difficult to tell. In either case, though, the walls were thick and plain; rough, unplastered, unpainted.

They poked along, looking into rooms on the left and right. Many still contained furniture and office equipment. The dry air seemed to have preserved everything perfectly except for the thick layer of dust. Every room had been trashed, however, by the visitors who had passed by through the centuries, looking for valuables. Papers were scattered everywhere, mixed with broken furniture and office machinery. No media cubes were in evidence, though. People gathered them up on spec. Paper was too bulky, and Imperial paper contained plastics and preservatives that smelled bad when burned, so no one used it even for starting campfires.

There was dust in the corridor, too, showing the passage of many feet over the years, and also marks that were less easy to figure out; perhaps someone had driven a walker through here. The trefoil footprint was typical of walker feet.

After about half an hour of more or less casual inspection, they came to the end of their corridor. A second corridor branched off at right angles. To their left was a sign that said, "Security."

"Let's try in there," said Michael. They went inside. There was a dogleg in the corridor, then the doorway into Security proper. This consisted of a large central room with other rooms opening onto it. In the middle of the room was an enormous stack of small, sturdy-looking plastic crates, each stamped "Official Property, State Department, Terra."

Michael froze, perplexed. "This can't be right," he said. "It isn't even hidden."

Marcos picked up one of the crates, raised it over his head, and dashed it to the stone floor. It burst open, and a cascade of gleaming gold bars fell to the floor.

Michael, still doubtful, went over to examine them. He took off his gauntlets and ran a fingernail over one of the bars, scratching the soft yellow metal easily. The bar seemed improbably heavy; another good sign.

"Let me borrow your power sword, Sandor," he said. Sandor handed over the short, ceramic-bladed weapon. Michael turned it on and sliced a bar in half with a touch of the howling blade. The bar was soft yellow gold all the way through.

"I don't get it," he said aloud. "The gold should be hidden, or guarded, or both." He thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, no sense worrying about it. Let's go back for the carriers and start loading this stuff up."

He stood up, put his gauntlets back on, and walked out of the Security section. The others followed.

Mayor York was lying on his back at the edge of the pond, a fishing pole held limply in his hand. In the nature of fishermen everywhere, he would have claimed that he was not asleep, but would have been at a loss to explain his snores. His pole has once been the nearly unbreakable antenna on a ground vehicle of the Ophiuchi Pirates'; a vehicle that had been destroyed over three centuries ago. His line had been purchased from a visiting Sarsi ship. The float was a light bulb from a broken bit of machinery discarded by a Morversarn trader a decade back. Only the hook was of local manufacture, made from a stainless alloy mined from the ruins of the old village.

York was awakened by the sound of lifters far away. He listened carefully. *San Vincentan corvette*, he decided. It sounded just like the ship di Cruz had arrived in four years ago. York stood up. He was short, pale (his planet's sun provided little ultraviolet), and very muscular, with long blond hair and a long blond beard of a slightly darker hue. He was wearing only a pair of shorts.

It might be di Cruz himself, he thought. *I had better get properly dressed*. He reeled in his line, leaned the pole against a tree regretfully, and started running back to his house. Di Cruz was

haughty and selfish, but he had style, and he appreciated style in others. Full regalia and a warm reception were mandatory.

He had run a couple of kilometers, half the distance to his house, when he was intercepted by a girl from the village. Nita was panting hard, but soon recovered enough breath to gasp out, "They are landing on the road across the river from the station."

"What?" asked York, nettled. "Are they *blind*? We risked our lives to paint that skull and crossbones. They should not have landed anywhere near it. Foreigners!"

They ran back to the village. When they arrived, York ran straight into his house and found his secretary, Elliot, unpacking the last of his mayorial regalia.

"Good work," said York. "Is it true that they landed near the pad?"

Elliot nodded. "Yes, your honor. Frank was hunting near the ridge and he used his mirror to flash us a message: one ship that looks like the one di Cruz had, but the crew acts differently."

"That makes sense," said York, allowing Elliot to assist him into his tunic. "Di Cruz had no need of our warning in the first place, and even if he had, he never would have ignored it. He would have landed here. He knew he was welcome. Well, whoever these strangers are, we need to warn and welcome them."

Elliot started strapping on York's breastplate, which had been salvaged from a suit of Imperial combat armor. "Can I come with you, Mr. Mayor?" Elliot was sixteen. He had been too young to participate in the ceremonies involving di Cruz' last visit, four years before, and nothing much had happened since then except for a lengthy visit by a Sarsi ship.

York looked at him levelly. Then, "Of course, lad. You are more than ready."

Elliot smiled and blushed, pleased, and helped York don his cape, sword, revolver, and helmet.

“You had better carry my sandals,” York told Elliot. “It will be a five-hour jog to the station.”

Elliot put on his own, far simpler regalia, and they stepped outside. The Deputies had turned out, of course, with the somewhat different armor, cape, revolver, helmet and sword of their station. York picked three of them (Ian, Thomas, and Randall) to accompany him. The other four were left at the village in case the starcrew decided to fly over for a visit. They would have to be decently received. After giving a few simple instructions, York, Elliot, and the three Deputies started loping to the station, thirty kilometers away.

They made good time. Elliot was excited and could not be held back, and his elders didn't like being outstripped by him. Several hours later they were on the ridge, more winded than was truly wise, looking down at the station and the ship. It was late afternoon. They were met by Frank, who explained what he had seen. “Your honor, three of them got out and walked around the ship, just looking around. Then they unloaded the jeepster to cover the blind side of the ship and took out a hose and dropped it in the river, just like they all do. Then the three went back in. A little later four came out—the original three and another one, I think. They were all in full armor and carrying rifles of some sort. They went up the road and walked into the station as if they had not a care in the world.”

York shaded his eyes with a hand. He turned to Elliot. “That is a fine ship. Look at the size of the ‘hyperdrive radiators’—those fins near the bottom. They are large, meaning that the ship is fast in ‘hyperspace,’ which is the space far from here. It also means that the ship is a fighting ship, because the large ‘hyperdrive’ uses much of the room that could otherwise be used for cargo. Closer to the earth is ‘normal space,’ which they cross using the ‘fusion drive.’ Very close to the ground is the ‘atmosphere,’ which they cross using the ‘lifters.’ You will have to learn all these names.

See how angular and slab-sided the ship is? It is no good for fighting in the 'atmosphere.' The ships that have no straight lines anywhere, that are all curves, are better. Now, tell me this—what armament does that ship have?"

Elliot stared at the ship for a moment, then stated confidently, "It has a tri-mount laser turret, your honor."

"Yes. And what armament did the Sarsi ship have?"

"Twin forward-firing lasers, your honor."

"Right again. The Sarsi ship was old and almost worn out. All Sarsi ships are old and almost worn out. The ship out there looks new. There are no patches, no dents, no imperfect lines. It is a shame that it has been placed in danger."

"Yes, your honor."

"We will rest for a few minutes, then run down to talk to them."

* * *

Left alone, Xavieros had soon tired of the jeepster and had returned to the ship. He had taken off his space suit and was reclining in the navigator's seat, wearing his flight suit and socks. He had ignored Michael's orders and was now very drunk.

The annunciator chimed. Xavieros leapt to his feet and then sat back down dizzily. Somebody at the door? Wasn't this planet supposed to be uninhabited? Whoever it was, they must be after the gold. Why hadn't the motion sensors gone off? Because no one had turned them on, that's why.

Snarling, Xavieros picked up his plasma pistol and staggered to the airlock. The security camera showed a little group of dust-covered natives at the base of the ladder. They were carrying swords and pistols.

Natives with primitive weapons were no threat to the ship, but Xavieros was savagely angry at them for frightening him. He swung the airlock door open, stepped onto the threshold, and emptied his plasma pistol in their general direction, not expect-

ing to hit anyone. Then he stepped back, slammed the airlock closed, and locked it.

Exhausted by his efforts, he staggered back to his chair and bottle.

* * *

They carried Elliot to the edge of the river. Protected to some extent by the steep river bank, they paused. York cradled the boy's broken body and rocked back and forth, weeping. Two of the deputies also shed tears. The third, Ian, had received a flesh wound in the arm from the starman's terrible weapon. He was silent and rigid with pain.

After a long time had passed, York wiped his eyes and said, "Let us leave this place. We will leave Elliot here for the moment, the better to help Ian. But we will be back very soon for our revenge." The sorrow faded from his face, to be replaced by a look of unyielding hatred. The Deputies knew that the crew of the space ship were all dead men.

MORDEL

Beverly, Briggs, Elizabeth, and Sandy met for their briefing just after lunch the next day, in the conference room that was part of their suite in the Majestic. Though Beverly would hardly have called the hotel a 'prissy Terran place,' she found that she shared Sandy's uneasiness. She had always found the Terrans to be the most alien of the Eight Worlds cultures.

There were a number of mysteries surrounding the Terrans. After the Imperial Court was moved to Waystar 1, Terran history became increasingly nebulous. Almost nothing was known about Terran history during the Troubles, though everyone agreed that Terra had never lost its space-flight technology. When space travel became general again, visiting starfarers were surprised to discover that the Terrans neither looked nor acted like their forebears, as portrayed in the old videos. To take just one example, the "melanin mutation," which allowed skin color to change more or less in real time in response to changes in light level, had become widespread in the Terran population. This implied that either the Terran population had at one time dwindled to no more than a few hundred individuals, or that illegal form-change technology had been employed on a wide scale. Neither option seemed at all plausible, and the Terrans themselves shed no light on the topic.

The Majestic was lavishly appointed according to the Terran taste, which to Beverly's mind made the place seem completely unlike a hotel. A rich doctor's office, perhaps, or a museum. It seemed strangely impersonal—perhaps irrelevant was the best word. The staff was much the same. All in all, Beverly had the sense of being in the wrong place.

She was exhausted. Elizabeth's distress at having killed a man had broadened into a general crisis of confidence. Acquiring the gold was going to be dangerous, and much of their plan revolved around Elizabeth's special skills. If she made a mistake, she and everyone else might be killed. The possibility (which she had dismissed out of hand, laughing, on San Vincento) had taken hold of her during the night, and it had been hours before she had regained her composure.

Beverly was sensitive, in spite of her calm, reserved exterior, and had always been easy prey for insomnia. The street battle would have kept her up anyway. Beverly had shot people before, but she hadn't gotten used to it and hoped she never would. As usual, Elizabeth's doubts had communicated themselves to Beverly, who now had two perfectly good reasons not to be able to sleep. When she had finally dozed, she had been visited by a dream that she could no longer remember. Her rare dreams were often prophetic, and she fretted at being unable to recall this one. All in all, Beverly was in a bad frame of mind when she opened the meeting.

* * *

This was not the first time that Elizabeth's self-assurance had cracked. When Beverly had heard that her roommate in her second year at the Academy would be first-year cadet Elizabeth di Montari, she had been a little intimidated. Elizabeth was the daughter of Professor Augustus di Montari, a combat-engineer-

turned-archaeologist who sometimes lectured at the Academy during his brief visits to San Vincento, and who was fairly worshiped by the Academy's staff. After his death during an expedition to an Imperial military installation on New Cincinnati (its automatic defenses still partly operational four hundred years after the planet was burned off), the Regents of the Academy had admitted Elizabeth immediately, though she was a full year below the minimum age. They did so in compliment to her father's memory, in recognition that she had nowhere else to go, and in view of her astonishing performance on the admittance tests.

Because of this, and because of the incredible fortitude that had been required for Elizabeth to extricate herself from the ruin her father's expedition (from which she was the sole survivor) Beverly had expected a figure of almost godlike stature. Instead, she entered her room that day and found a foreign-looking, improbably young girl sobbing uncontrollably into her pillow. On Beverly's entrance, Elizabeth made a mighty effort at controlling herself, but failed.

Beverly closed the door hurriedly—emotional outbursts were not tolerated in the Academy, even in private—and stood inside the room, wondering what to do. Ordinary good manners required her to leave instantly and pretend that the incident had never occurred. Academy regulations required that Elizabeth be reported at once.

She was struck by the memory of the kindness she had received when she, too, had arrived in a strange place, friendless and newly orphaned. Peer Sandra, her daughter Emily, and Emily's fiancé George had befriended her when she needed it most, and had protected her at great risk to themselves against Miguel di Cruz' attempts to murder her. Without their support, she would surely not have survived. This had been on Barigost, a world that most San Vincentans would have described as "insig-

nificant” and “backward,” and its inhabitants as “natives” and “barbarians.” What would Emily have done?

Beverly crossed the room, knelt beside the bed, and, fighting down a wave of panic (she had always been shy) took Elizabeth’s hand. “It’s all right,” she said. “It’s all right.”

Elizabeth regained a fragile composure after a minute or two. She released Beverly’s hand, sat up, wiped her eyes, smiled weakly, and said, “You must be Beverly. I’m Elizabeth di Montari.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” said Beverly. Then, remembering her own loneliness in her first weeks here, smiled ironically. “Welcome to the Academy.”

Elizabeth laughed shakily. “Thanks,” she said. They made small talk for a few minutes, somewhat at random. Beverly began to feel that she and Elizabeth had many things in common. Not only because of their strong academic credentials, but because they both had become something like foreigners on their own planet during their long and eventful absences from home. Elizabeth and her father had made only brief visits to San Vincento; the last time she spent an entire year at home was when she was twelve years old. Neither of them were comfortable with their peers, who seemed childish and narrow.

Suddenly, Elizabeth said, “You’re not what I expected.”

Beverly was not sure how to take this. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, you have quite a reputation. It paints you as remote, relentless, hyper-competent, and completely unemotional,” said Elizabeth, smiling. “In short, the perfect Academy girl. No one forgets that you killed Miguel di Cruz, or that you stayed at the top of your class, ahead of all those *naturally superior boys*”—her voice dripped with irony—“for the entire year.” She smiled again, “But you don’t seem to be acting the part today, which I think is just as well.”

This information left Beverly as off- balance as before. She had had no idea that people saw her that way, and Elizabeth's teasing but forthright honesty made her uncomfortable. "Well," she said, "I hear that you're going to give me more than a little competition in the academic line."

Elizabeth, completely sure of herself now, put a hand on Beverly's arm and gazed directly into her eyes. "No," she said earnestly. "We'll never compete with one another, Beverly. Best friends don't do that."

Deeply touched, Beverly found herself saying, "No, I don't suppose they do. And call me Bev."

* * *

Sandy insisted that the meeting start with a post-mortem on yesterday's attack, rather than with Beverly and Elizabeth's prepared presentation on the mission at hand. Beverly glanced in concern at Elizabeth.

"It's okay, Bev," she said. "Sandy's right." Elizabeth always recovered quickly, and looked disgustingly confident and well-rested. She was wearing a somber business suit in an attempt to look professional, but it just made her look adorable, like a child playing dress-up. Elizabeth yearned to be taken seriously, but her appearance was against her. She envied Beverly, once more dressed in a black flight suit, for always looking like she had stepped right out of a recruiting poster, and always being exactly what she seemed.

Sandy got the ball rolling. "They all came from that single truck," she said. "Tactically, it was simple enough. They must have followed us in a smaller vehicle, then set up while we were inside. It was a pretty good attempt, all in all. If that idiot Aguilar hadn't been so god damned eager to talk, they would have had it in the bag. I always thought that it was a myth."

“What was?” asked Beverly.

“That a San Vincentan can’t pull the trigger until he’s run out of things to talk about. That’s what the Goans said, anyway. Just high-born San Vincentans, mind you. Briggs here would probably only chew the fat for a couple of minutes before ringing down the curtain.”

Beverly, recalling Miguel di Cruz’ conversation with her in the last moments before she had shot him, darted a murderous glare at Sandy. She was startled by Elizabeth’s peal of laughter.

“You’d better watch out, Sandy,” she said. “Bev’s not used to being teased by anyone but me. A New Carinan once told me you can always tell the San Vincentans officers on the battlefield—they’re the ones who bring camera crews to record everyone’s last words ... oh, all *right*, Bev! I’ll be good.” She stopped, unrepentant, still smiling.

Sandy continued with an account of the battle, asking a few questions of Briggs and Beverly to help get the details straight. She wanted to understand exactly what had happened, from start to finish. Beverly was willing to go along with this, and Briggs seemed to enjoy this display of professionalism, but Elizabeth, though silent, made no effort to conceal her impatience.

Sandy was delighted to discover that both Briggs and Beverly had video cameras built into their plasma guns. She synchronized the two video streams and projected them side by side. Beverly saw right away that Briggs’ performance in action was exactly the same as in practice, while she was noticeably jerkier. Sandy had nothing but praise for their performance, and gloated over the devastation wreaked by the plasma guns. “You two could have taken out that god damned machine gun,” she concluded. “Well, fifty-fifty, anyway.”

Sandy turned off the projection and summed up the end of the battle from her point of view. “After the shooting stopped,” she continued, “Briggs wanted to hustle Elizabeth and Beverly off,

and I wanted to poke around a little. So I switched handguns with Briggs and let you guys take off. Then I called the cops. The Mordel cops treat starcrew like VIP's and street scum like street scum, so that's okay.

"They showed up right away, so I think the shopkeeper called them first. They took a statement. I didn't tell them any lies, but I made it sound like my guys and I did all the shooting and my unnamed Eight Worlds pals were pretty much innocent bystanders. The plasma gun at my side explained one set of corpses, and Hank and Reynard's hand blasters explained the other. I said the driver was taken out by a sonic grenade, so I guess I did tell them one lie."

Sandy continued, "Anyway, I gave them a statement, and then we looked at the bodies and interrogated the machine-gun crew. Except for Aguilar, they were all locals. There were four guys in the machine-gun crew. Specialists, not part of the gang. We recovered ten bodies and twelve rifles. The guns had just been broken out of storage. They had a lot of grease on them, and a couple of them still had inventory tags hanging off the trigger guards. So I figure that Aguilar offered to pay them in rifles if they'd round out his numbers. The cops said it's a standard sort of deal when you're dealing with these cheap-ass street gangs.

"The machine-gun crew told us that Aguilar wanted us alive. The guns were all supposed to be loaded, but with no rounds in the chambers. That bought us some time in the beginning.

"Aguilar didn't have anything interesting on him. He was a pro, I think. What do you think, Beverly?"

"From his bearing, I think he was a naval officer," said Beverly. "Not Academy trained, of course, but he probably served at least a full term as a junior officer. Not bringing sensitive documents to the battlefield is part of every officer's training."

“Sounds right,” said Sandy. “So who was Aguilar, how did he know about the gold, and was he working alone, or are there plenty more of these sons of bitches where he came from?”

Beverly considered. “Maybe we ought to shelve this discussion until after the main briefing, Sandy. You still haven’t heard the whole story.”

Sandy acquiesced grudgingly. “All right, but let’s keep in mind that Aguilar may have been a junior partner in this thing. There might be a big cheese right here on Mordel who can replace him in a second. We need to watch our backs. We were lucky.”

Briggs spoke. “It wasn’t luck, Sandy. It was Elizabeth.”

“Yeah, sure, but if she hadn’t stopped to powder her nose, she would have been in the soup with the rest of us. By the way,” she said, turning to Elizabeth, “That driver didn’t have a mark on him. What the hell did you use on him?”

“A weapon,” said Elizabeth blandly.

Sandy tried to stare her down, but Elizabeth was not intimidated. If anything, her neutral expression was replaced by the ghost of a smile. “Huh,” said Sandy, annoyed. “Well, be that way.”

Briggs had something else to say. “Sandy, you got lucky with that sonic grenade. Sonic weapons are junk. Good hearing protection makes them useless.”

Sandy bristled. “You think so?”

Briggs nodded.

Sandy dug into a pocket in her flight suit and pulled out a sonic grenade. She grinned wolfishly at Briggs. “Then I don’t suppose you’ll mind when I do *this*.” She turned a knob on the grenade and set it down on the table. Then she folded her arms and smiled at the others.

Beverly reached down to her gun belt and whipped out her protectors. Briggs did the same. After a dramatic pause, Sandy donned her own gear, still grinning. Elizabeth made no move of

any kind, but watched the grenade with a look of mild apprehension.

The grenade started emitting a bone-rattling sound. Beverly found it extremely unpleasant even with hearing protection. Sandy's grin faded. Briggs remained expressionless. Elizabeth was scowling slightly. After fifteen seconds the grenade went silent, and Sandy stuffed it back into her pocket. The noise had been unpleasant but not debilitating.

After it stopped, Elizabeth said something. Beverly heard nothing. Elizabeth frowned, hesitated, then said something else. Again, Beverly heard nothing.

Neither did Sandy. She took off her ear protectors and threw them with a clatter to the table. "Got damn it!" she began, then stopped and looked accusingly at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth burst out laughing. Her laughter was clearly audible.

Sandy muttered something under her breath, then turned to Briggs. "Looks like you're right after all," she said. "But I'll still carry one in case I get tired of waiting in line somewhere." She jabbed a finger at Elizabeth. "So why aren't you stunned?"

"In-the-ear electronic hearing protection, of course," replied Elizabeth. "I'm also wearing flash-guard contact lenses. One looks *so* untidy rummaging around in a purse at the beginning of a fight."

Just then there was a knock at the door. Briggs opened it. A woman in the uniform of Hotel Security asked if everything was all right. A squad of Security personnel was almost but not quite out of sight down the corridor. Briggs assured the officer that Sandy's sonic grenade had gone off as she was displaying it, and that he regretted the incident extremely. He forked over a generous tip, which the officer accepted gravely, as if she disapproved but understood the need to treat the San Vincentan's quaint native customs with respect. Briggs bowed to her and closed the door.

“Let’s start the main briefing,” said Beverly. “Elizabeth?” She had decided to let Elizabeth give the briefing, in case Sandy needed to be convinced of her competence.

Elizabeth stood up. “The whole thing started when some members of the San Vincentan Embassy on Terra got wind of a deal to the Centaurus Federation involving trade concessions and foreign aid, and somehow obtained information about the itinerary of the foreign aid payment. The payment was very large, and they decided to make a grab for it.”

“How large?” asked Sandy. “I don’t think even Fabian knows the details.”

“Almost the entire payment consisted of gold bars worth four hundred million bezants.”

Sandy was stunned. “That’s one hell of a foreign aid payment.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth. “There was something fishy about the whole thing. It was far too large for its stated purpose, it was carried by the wrong ships, and it took the wrong itinerary. I have no idea what the whole thing was about. There isn’t a single expert on the Centaurus Federation in all of San Vincento, so there was no one for us to consult with.

“In any event, their plan was to use three hired frigates for the journey, staffed with naval crews on leave of absence—essentially on loan to the Centaurus Trade Council, which is the Terran cartel that monopolizes Terran-Centaurus trade. They were going to head from Terra to Mordel, then around Valhalla, stopping only at marginal, semi-uncharted planets to avoid notice. Eventually they’d reach Centaurus, having left no official record of their passage.”

Sandy was annoyed. “They should have gone with the god damned convoy,” she said. “That’s what it’s for. Even if they wanted to keep the gold a secret, it wouldn’t be that bulky. Let’s see...”

“About fourteen tons, counting the packaging,” said Elizabeth.

“Okay, fourteen tons, then,” continued Sandy. “In a big operation like the CTC convoy, fourteen tons of crates marked ‘Do Not Open Until Christmas’ wouldn’t stand out at all.”

“I agree,” said Beverly “There’s more to it than that. But we don’t have any idea what.”

“You know,” said Elizabeth, “we *are* talking about the Terrans. They may have used the gold as a blind for their true purpose.”

Sandy choked. “Four hundred million in gold as a *blind*? Are you crazy?”

“No, no, listen to me,” said Elizabeth earnestly. “It makes sense. The Terrans hand out huge subsidies all the time. They could take, say, five years’ worth of subsidies they knew they were going to pay anyway, lump them together, and use them to dazzle the eyes of anyone watching. The hand is quicker than the eye. It’d work, too. Who knows? Maybe they succeeded in their primary mission in spite of everything. I’ll bet they’re laughing their heads off because we’re such a bunch of rubes.”

She sighed. “But I’m getting ahead of the story. Someone at the San Vincentan Embassy learned about the shipment. Baron di Vasco leaked the word to Miguel di Cruz on Barigost, who was helping his Barigost allies prepare their coup against Fabian. Di Cruz and his Barigost allies jumped at the bait.

“One of the Terran frigates suffered mechanical trouble and was left behind on Mordel, so they faced only two ships off a planet near Dancel. He came in with two San Vincentan ships—a frigate and a corvette—and two Barigost frigates. The Terrans put up a stubborn fight, and were only barely defeated. Both Barigost ships were heavily damaged, and before they were operational, di Cruz loaded all the gold into his corvette and both his ships vanished.”

Sandy laughed. “What a pal. So what happened to his buddies and the Terrans?”

“Di Cruz had welded the surviving Terrans into the cargo bay of one of their own ships. The Barigost ships were supposed to take them into custody, but their ships were so trashed that neither one was under way before the Terrans broke out and repaired both their ships.”

Sandy laughed again. “Whoops!”

Elizabeth smiled maliciously. “Whoops indeed. The San Vincentan Embassy on Terra was not prepared for what happened next. The Terrans descended on the Embassy like a plague. They had proof. Tapes of the battle, security camera footage of the boarding action, positive I.D. of di Cruz’ ships. They had Terran witnesses. They had Barigost prisoners. And on the other end, they caught the woman who had been leaking secrets to the Embassy and to di Vasco, and she told them everything she knew.

“It could hardly have been more damning. High-ranking diplomats had committed piracy and espionage for private gain, using the Embassy as a blind. That’s treason. There was, to put it mildly, a big shakeout. Several high-ranking diplomats committed suicide. One even shot himself in the back. Others were imprisoned or cashiered. A flurry of duels thinned the survivors considerably. But di Vasco vanished entirely just before the hammer fell.”

“So what makes you think he hasn’t already walked off with the loot?” asked Sandy.

Elizabeth turned to Beverly, who said, “Because he doesn’t know where it is. No one knows where it is but me. Only the crew of di Cruz’ corvette knew where it was. In our air battle on Barigost, I shot down the corvette, and di Cruz was the sole survivor. He gave the map to me.”

“Just before you shot him, I suppose,” said Sandy sourly.

Beverly glared at her. “That’s right.”

Sandy met her gaze for a long moment, then flinched and turned away, “All right, all right, I’m sorry, god damn it! Stop

burning holes in me with those eyes of yours!” She paused, then sighed hugely. “So what’s the catch?”

“Catch?”

“You don’t need me unless there’s a catch. You could just buy an old ship, head out to the planet, scoop up the gold for yourself, and no one would be the wiser. You’re not doing it; you’re talking about dealing me in for a share of the loot. You like me, but you could’ve said it with flowers. So what’s the god damned catch?”

“Show her the catch, Elizabeth,” said Beverly.

Elizabeth reached into a folder, pulled out a photograph, and handed it to Sandy. It showed a strange, insectile, eight-legged robot with a long, horizontal, grasshopper-like carapace and a turret where the head should have been.

“God damn,” breathed Sandy. “An Imperial security robot. One of those sons of bitches practically killed me before I took it out, way back when. I was in power armor and had a good team backing me up, but it was close.” She looked up from the photo. “Just the one?”

“No,” said Elizabeth. “There are six of them.”

Michael was startled to hear a harsh, metallic voice behind him.

“Drop your weapons and identify yourselves,” said the voice. “You are in a restricted area.”

Michael turned. To his horror, the corridor behind them held an Imperial security robot. Standing about a meter and a half high at the shoulder, the robot had eight slender legs and a long horizontal carapace. A short tube protruded from the head-mounted turret, containing the terminal optics of a laser cannon capable of blasting through body armor or lightly armored vehicles with ease. Two manipulator arms were folded on its chest.

This particular robot was in dreadful shape. Two of the elegant, spidery legs were missing from the right side, and one left leg dangled uselessly. The carapace was cracked and pitted, especially in front. It had seen a lot of action in its time.

Michael knew a little bit about security robots. He might be able to talk his way out. He lowered his plasma rifle to the ground and started to walk toward it.

Marcos had other ideas. He spun around and began spraying the robot with fire from his plasma rifle.

The robot dodged. It moved so quickly that it seemed to appear in a new location without having crossed the intervening

distance. Its turret spun, its laser gun pointing right at Marcos' head.

There was a loud chattering sound, but the laser didn't fire.

Marcos laughed and changed clips. "You don't have any fucking guns!" he shouted at the robot. "Take this!" He tried to riddle the dancing robot with plasma gun fire.

The turret spun rapidly left and right several times, like a terrier worrying a rat. Then it aimed at Marcos again. A flickering, stuttering blast of laser fire flashed from the tube, striking his helmet in the exact center of his forehead. A cloud of sparks and incandescent gas poured from his helmet as the ablative layers began to boil away. Marcos dodged and fired at the robot, which was still dancing around to avoid his shots. In spite of their motion, the on-again, off-again beam never deviated as much as a millimeter from its point of aim.

After two or three seconds of this, Marcos suddenly stiffened and clapped a hand to his forehead. His gauntlets were no match for the laser and were burned through almost immediately. Marcos began to scream.

Michael whipped out his plasma pistol and began to shoot bursts into the robot, aiming directly at the turret, hoping to take out the gun. Sandor and Ramirez concealed themselves in doorways and opened fire with their plasma rifles. Even in the narrow confines of the corridor, the dodging robot was extraordinarily hard to hit as it weaved forward and backwards, left and right, and even bobbed up and down on its jointed legs.

Suddenly the robot shot forward and grabbed Marcos by the shoulders with its manipulator arms. A needle-pointed spike flicked from the robot's chest, piercing Marcos' body and protruding half a meter from his back. A flickering blue light danced around Marcos' convulsing form, and the sound of arcing almost drowned out his screams. The robot withdrew the deathlance,

flung Marcos' smoking body aside, and rushed Sandor in his doorway.

Michael poured burst after burst into the robot's body, changing clips every third burst. He didn't even attempt to take cover.

The robot incinerated Sandor with its deathlance almost immediately, the blue nimbus much brighter this time. Long blue arcs sizzled from Sandor's body to the floor, the walls, the ceiling, and the robot's carapace. The robot's carapace began to blaze throughout its length with dancing blue light. Michael realized that the power regulation on the deathlance was broken.

The robot released its victim and turned on Ramirez.

It's targeting the person who's the most potent threat, thought Michael. *I've only got a pistol, so I'll be the last one killed.* He dismissed thoughts of running away; cowardly, unworthy.

Ramirez had no such compunctions. He dropped his rifle and shouted, "I surrender! I surrender!" The robot instantly turned on Michael.

Michael fired another burst. More or less by accident, he blew off the robot's left front leg. The robot put its weight on the right front leg, but the cracked carapace on that side gave way under the strain. The robot staggered and plowed headfirst into a wall.

Ramirez picked up his rifle and resumed firing. Michael went to change clips on his pistol—and realized that he was out of ammunition. He was about to dive for his plasma rifle when the robot gave a convulsive leap, shoving off with its manipulator arms. It grabbed Ramirez. The deathlance incinerated the elderly pilot in an almost explosive discharge of blue fire and sparks. This was the robot's undoing. The deathlance set off some kind of internal reaction, and brilliant sheets of white flame poured from the cracks in the robot's carapace. The robot started darting about at random, bouncing off the walls with incredible force. On its fifth bound it leapt right over Michael, who ducked as the fiery

robot roared overhead, dripping sparks and scraping rubble from the ceiling. The robot plowed clumsily into the left-hand wall.

Michael turned and fled down the corridor.

He had just passed the Security area when he saw another robot come into sight ahead, accelerating toward him at a terrific rate. Michael dashed into Security, hoping that the dogleg in the corridor would be too tight to allow the robot entry.

The new robot stopped outside, just as he had hoped. It spoke. Its voice-generator was defective, but Michael could just make out what it was saying. "You are in a restricted area," it said. "Show proper clearances or surrender, or I will be compelled to destroy you."

"What will you do with me if I surrender?" asked Michael.

"I will hand you over to the Security section," replied the robot.

"But I'm already *in* the Security section," replied Michael.

"That is true," agreed the robot.

"Thus, I do not need to surrender, as the desired result has already been achieved."

"That is true," agreed the robot.

Michael took a deep breath. "So can I leave now?"

"Yes," replied the robot. "If you display a proper exit pass or are escorted by authorized Security personnel."

Michael considered. The contents of the desks and filing cabinets had been largely intact, though dumped and scattered. He hadn't checked the rooms in this area, but they might have the official forms and authorizations he needed. Maybe he could forge himself a pass and escape unharmed.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

MORDEL

“Six robots is about five too many,” said Sandy flatly. “Well, four too many, anyway. You don’t get to take these sons of bitches out one at a time. They communicate with each other and back each other up. How the hell did di Cruz manage to get away from there in one piece?”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” said Elizabeth. “Let me give you some background. The world in question is designated K117c by the IEC. It is a hot, arid world of 0.95 gees. Here’s an aerial photo of the site in question, from the IEC report. As you can see, it contains an administrative building. That’s where the gold is. What you don’t see is the rest of Terran Fleet Basic Research Station 3211, which consisted of the admin building, an archaeological dig, and a small town, all three widely separated. The IEC survey caught only the admin building, missing the other two sites entirely.”

“How do you know about them, then?” asked Sandy.

“I have a reference work on the known research stations that Daddy put together from a variety of sources. Here is a map of what the site looked like four hundred years ago. This map was part of a grant proposal calling for the construction of a civic center, there being no building large enough to house public meetings. The proposal was approved initially, but it...” Elizabeth

stopped. Sandy wasn't listening. She was studying the map from the grant proposal. When she finished, she looked at the aerial photograph again.

"Is this planet about eight parsecs away from Barigost, outward and a little north?" she asked.

"That's right," said Elizabeth. "The coordinates are with the other physical statistics...here." She produced another sheet of paper.

Sandy glanced at it, then pulled out a pocket computer, showed it the sheet, and asked it to match the star. The answer appeared on the screen.

"God damn," said Sandy. "I know this planet. We call it Smugler's Fair. We use it as a rendezvous for buyers and sellers of all kinds of loot. We'd sometimes get a dozen ships down at once in the old days. It was a great way of unloading stuff on the sly—or picking up stuff on the sly, for that matter. It's a good planet for that sort of thing. Hardly anybody else ever comes there except for a few Sarsi ships, but the air is fine and the weather is predictable—though it's too god damned hot for my blood—and it's conveniently placed. The locals are a hoot."

She frowned for a moment, then added, "I never saw any god-damned robots, though. Where are they?"

"In the Admin building."

Sandy shook her head. "Can't be. I've been in that building. It's been used as a warehouse off and on, and people camp there sometimes. There aren't any robots there."

"They're new," said Elizabeth. "Well, actually, they've been there all the time, but di Cruz had a military engineer with him who did the kind of site assessment that nobody ever bothers to do, and he traced a some power and data lines past the end of what looked like a dead-end corridor in the sub-basement. The ceiling had caved in and closed it off, or maybe somebody dropped it on purpose. Anyway, he sent a borer camera in to take

a look and found an automated repair depot with a dozen robots in it. He activated the repair unit from the safety of the Security section, and it began recommissioning half a dozen robots. He didn't do this until di Cruz was ready to lift."

"Smart man," said Sandy. "Debugging a security robot's orders isn't the sort of thing you live to do twice." She thought about it for a moment. "So is there a magic word that makes them go all peaceful on us?"

"No," said Elizabeth. "Di Cruz didn't like the idea of deserters walking off with the gold. He figured that *he* could come back with enough firepower to destroy the robots, but that it would be a stretch for anyone else to do so. So he left it at that."

"Six of them," Sandy muttered. "Damn. How the hell did he ever expect to take out six of them?"

"I'm not sure, but the robots are divided into two groups. The first group does outdoor patrols, and would presumably be vulnerable to attacks from a distance. The second group is inside the administration building and would have to be taken out by frontal assault." She paused. "Unless, of course you talked your way past them."

Sandy shifted uneasily. "How?"

"It's simple, really. These are military robots. Any Terran military officer can issue certain kinds of orders to them. All that's necessary is to present them with a Terran officer and issue the right kind of orders, and we'll be able to walk right in."

Remembering Elizabeth's purchases of the last day, Sandy said, "And you're the officer."

"That's right."

"What happens if the robots figure out that you're an imposter?"

"I will be killed. But they won't figure it out, because I'm not an imposter. I have a perfectly valid commission in the Imperial Fleet."

“Impossible!”

“No, not at all. The Imperium was never officially dissolved; it fell to pieces bit by bit. There were several official decentralizations, where local authorities were given the power to act in the Emperor’s name in most matters. These powers were never rescinded. So all it takes is to find an organization that has preserved its continuity since those times and has never renounced the Imperium.”

“I’ll be damned,” said Sandy. “So who did you find?”

“There are actually several to choose from. This strategy has been used to take control of Imperial installations for decades. The IEC is a good choice, for example, because its charter has remained unaltered since Imperial times, and it was given the right to appoint officers up to Captain. Many installations have aid-and-assistance clauses for IEC officers in any event. But Daddy always used commissions from the Baron di Rolando, who happens to be a hereditary admiral through a chain of circumstances that seems implausible to most people, but has been accepted without question by most Imperial installations and robots so far.”

Sandy leaned back in her chair. “You kids think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?”

Elizabeth smiled. “You don’t know the half of it. We’re brilliant. The rest of the cadets cower at our mighty intellects. It’s made us tremendously unpopular.”

“And that’s a good thing, is it?”

“Well, no, but since we were going to be unpopular anyway, we decided not to pull our punches.”

Sandy looked surprised. “I don’t follow you.”

“Well, Bev here is the pure, Platonic ideal of the San Vincentan Shipmistress, which is like being surrounded by your own personal anti-boy force screen. Our literature always portrays the Shipmistress as being on a higher moral plane than the people

around her. Smarter, too. And she always ends up executing her comrades for treason or leading her ship into a noble act of self-immolation. In short, the Shipmistress is a stuck-up, virginal jinx, and people are glad that she's almost extinct."

Beverly smiled sourly at this description. She replied, "In short, I'm too San Vincentan, and it makes people uncomfortable. Elizabeth isn't San Vincentan enough, and people don't know how to react to that, either."

"That's a delicate way of putting it," said Elizabeth. When Sandy raised an eyebrow she added reluctantly, "Everyone knows that off-planet girls are whores."

Sandy glowered. "Bastards. Well, as long as you didn't actually kill any of them."

Elizabeth flinched.

Beverly said, "No, they're all still alive." She patted Elizabeth's hand. "See? You're being too hard on yourself."

Elizabeth pulled her hand away and glared sullenly at Beverly. "Knock it off." Then, with a show of brisk professionalism, "Let's get back on topic. What were we talking about?"

"You were telling us how amazingly smart you are," said Beverly.

Elizabeth gave her another glare, then burst out laughing.

Sandy said, "Let's cut to the chase here. You two are so smart you're gonna cut yourselves to pieces, probably on those god damned robots. You don't need me for that. It's not like I can take out the robots, anyway. The only thing I've got that's up to the job is my ship, and the damned things go to ground when a ship's around. No, you've got something else in mind. Give."

Elizabeth hesitated. "You'd better take this one, Bev."

Beverly smiled. "Baron di Vasco told Miguel di Cruz about the Terran gold, and arranged a rendezvous so that they and the gold could leave this region of space afterwards. The rendezvous was a trap. Di Vasco intended to murder di Cruz."

Sandy nodded. "Thieves fall out," she said.

"No, he hated di Cruz. Back when they were all junior officers, di Cruz and my father played a trick on di Vasco, welding him into a dumpster when he was headed for a date with the woman he loved. That was the end of the relationship. The chance for revenge plus 400 million in gold was too good to pass up.

"At the same time he sent di Cruz word about the gold, he forwarded news that my father had been appointed ambassador to Valhalla, along with the lie that my father knew that di Cruz was still alive and intended to finish him off. Then, when my father arrived on Terra, di Vasco told him that di Cruz was still alive and was eager for a reconciliation."

"What a bastard!" said Sandy.

"Finally, di Vasco sent di Cruz word of my father's imminent, avenging presence on Mordel and Barigost, with the intention that at least one of them would be killed, and di Vasco would be left alone with the gold. The news reached di Cruz when he arrived on Barigost after skipping the rendezvous and hiding the gold on his own. The rest you know.

"As for di Vasco, the Terrans learned of the heist just a few days after my parents and I departed Terra, and di Vasco fled, first to the rendezvous point, and then to parts unknown."

Beverly paused and then said, "Our initial goal is to flush di Vasco from hiding. We're using the gold as a lure. Our main goal is to kill him."

Sandy was silent for a time, then surprised Beverly by asking, "What happened to the girl di Vasco was dating?"

"She married my father. Di Vasco never married."

"God damn. That makes you the daughter he never had."

Beverly was taken aback by this concept. She could feel her ears burning.

Sandy took pity on her and changed the subject. "What kind of ships does he have?"

Elizabeth said, "He escaped with a fairly new frigate built on Sinclair. We don't know what he has now, if anything. A friend of Bev's father leaked most of the information from the investigation to us, but things become hazy after di Vasco's flight. No new captures were made, and the leads fizzled out. But the attempt to pick us up yesterday was a good sign. The smart money among the San Vincentans is that di Vasco found the gold and escaped to parts unknown, even though di Cruz didn't show up at the rendezvous. After all, di Vasco is missing and the gold is missing. Only the people in this room know they aren't missing together."

"Di Vasco knows," said Sandy. "So does his crew, probably."

"Well, obviously. Now we need to flush him out and finish him off. That's where you come in."

"I don't know anything about your idiotic dueling customs, and I'm not about to learn," said Sandy.

Beverly smiled. "We won't be standing on formality," she said. "Revenge is a dish that is best served from concealment. If we can find him, we intend to rat him out to the Terrans. Anonymously."

"That doesn't sound very San Vincentan," said Sandy.

"Then you don't know us very well," replied Elizabeth.

There was an uncomfortable pause, then Sandy asked, "So what's your plan, exactly?"

"We don't have one," said Elizabeth cheerfully. "That's more in your line. You have the local knowledge."

Sandy swore under her breath for a moment, then said, "You probably think you're joking. But I'll show you how this sort of thing is done. You're looking for a guy ... what the hell do you think he's been doing for the last four years? And has he been here all this time, or is he going to blow in as soon as he hears you're not on San Vincento?"

"We don't know," said Beverly.

Sandy pondered a moment, then said, "Keeping an eye on inbound traffic, that's easy. If he's been holed up here the whole time ... aren't the Terrans still looking for him?"

"Very much so," agreed Beverly.

"Then he'll have sold his ship and taken some kind of job beneath his station in order to lie low. Maybe he's bought a more practical ship, since an Eight Worlds ship would have sucked down, what, a million in upkeep by now?"

"About that," agreed Elizabeth.

"But he hasn't sold the ship," added Beverly.

"Why not?"

"Because you don't do things like that. Ships are sacred. He may be a traitor and a thief, but he's still a gentleman so long as he has a good ship. Barbarian ships don't count."

"Thanks," said Sandy.

"Besides, he'd never trust a barbarian ship to actually function when he wants it to. San Vincentans have a horror of low-tech ships. He'd see it as a recipe for failure."

"So you're telling me that he has this white elephant of a ship sucking down all his money. And if we find the ship, we find him. Hmm ... well, that's doable. Okay. Here's what we'll do. We'll wander around the spaceport district shooting the breeze with all the skippers. I was going to do that anyway. Most of the skippers know me. We'll need a cover story for you two."

Elizabeth said instantly, "I'm hiring you to pick up a forerunner artifact that Daddy wanted."

"God damn, but I hate those things!" exclaimed Sandy. "They're bad luck. Even harmless-looking things like broken machine tools are bad luck. That stuff creeps me out." She paused and added, "But okay. I'll do it as a favor for Beverly. It's not a bad cover story."

Elizabeth passed over a sheet of paper. "Good. It's on Smugler's Fair. It should be in the safe at the dig site."

Sandy recoiled as if the sheet of paper were a snake. “You don’t mean that thing is real?”

Elizabeth smiled sunnily. “We won’t know until we look, now will we? But we can carelessly drop any information on this sheet, and it won’t do any harm. Nothing about Smuggler’s Fair, obviously. Also, Daddy was well-known in certain quarters, and no one will be surprised if I’m running off after some of the low-hanging fruit. That’s our cover story on San Vincenzo, too, by the way.”

“You shouldn’t mess around with that forerunner crap,” said Sandy. “There’s a reason why all those races went extinct.”

“Too late now,” said Elizabeth.

Sandy raised an eyebrow, but Elizabeth did not elaborate.

Sandy pondered a moment and said, “I don’t like your plan for walking past the robots. Too risky. I’m not too happy about just poking around until di Vasco jumps. We need a better plan. But I don’t have one yet. Let’s bop around the spaceport while we wait for inspiration. Kick some tires. We’ll probably learn something useful, and that’ll clarify our next move. Or maybe someone will take a shot at us, though that seems like too much to hope for, after yesterday.”

MORDEL

Baron di Vasco paced the length of his modest apartment in Mordel City. He had been fond of Aguilar. More than that, Aguilar had been his eyes and ears on the streets, allowing di Vasco to hold down a demanding but lucrative job at one of the city's semi-legitimate banks. Most of his earnings went to maintain his ship, the *Vanguard*, at a little-used field well outside the city. The rest of his crew also held jobs. Only Aguilar had been free to set his own hours, playing the role of a disgraced son whose parents sent him an allowance on the condition that he did not return home – which is exactly what he was. (Though the remittances had ceased once they had gone into hiding.) He had mixed easily with cutthroats and ne'er-do-wells.

Di Vasco had only the police report to go on. Peer Sandra and her bodyguards had opened fire at once, apparently during a parley. He never ceased to be amazed at the degeneracy of barbarians. Why hadn't the machine gun cowed them? It didn't matter now.

According to the police report, the Barigosters had done all the shooting. Lady Beverly and her bodyguard seemed to be negligible quantities. And who was that other girl? She wasn't San Vincentan. The police report hadn't even mentioned her. Was she some plaything Lady Beverly had picked up on her

journey? He didn't want to believe that. A Terran spy, perhaps? That was more likely. Even a good girl like Lady Beverly was at risk when traveling off-world, especially from practiced perverts like the Terrans. Hard to believe that a pretty, fresh-faced little thing like Beverly's companion could be much of an agent, though. Maybe she didn't have to be, if the real professional was nearby. He would have to be careful.

He continued pacing. His ship had a hypertracer, a good one, and he could simply follow Peer Sandra's ship wherever it went. The hypertracer's range went far beyond that of any barbarian's sensor suite, so he could follow her undetected. But he would much rather cut her out of the picture altogether. He wanted Beverly.

He paced to the end of the room and gazed at the framed picture of Beverly on his wall. It was a formal portrait taken the year before, at the Academy. She was the embodiment of young San Vincentan womanhood. They should have made a recruiting poster out of it.

He wanted Beverly.

Probably the simplest thing, he reasoned, was to pick up that little girl she's traveling with. It won't be hard, and she's probably a spy. Then we'll see.

Michael looked around the Security area. In general it was a shambles, except for the gold, in its neat stack of plastic crates, and an anomalously intact workstation with desk, chair, and terminal.

“No,” he said aloud. “That’s Plan B.” Hacking an Imperial installation might take ages. He wanted to leave *now*. Plan A was to get the robot to let him.

He wanted to pace, but the floor was too littered with assorted debris, so he stood and tapped his foot instead. He was still rattled from the fight. It was hard to concentrate.

His stomach growled. It was long past lunchtime. “All right. Let’s try it,” he said aloud. Raising his voice, he called out, “Hey, jailer! It’s past lunchtime! You have to feed me!”

There was no way that this installation could have a supply of food, and in the absence of food, the Imperial regulations governing the treatment of prisoners would require that he be released. He would be back at his ship in a matter of minutes!

The robot, out of sight, replied in its buzzing, damaged monotone. “That is true. A meal will be served in two minutes.”

Disappointed, Michael crept to the end of the dogleg and peered into the corridor. The robot was gone. Michael’s discarded plasma rifle was gone, too. So were the bodies of his crew and

that of the other robot. If it weren't for the lingering smell of burnt metal, the combat might almost have been a dream.

Soon the robot came back into view, moving at about a human running pace, carrying a plastic crate in its manipulator arms. Michael resisted the urge to flee back into Security. The robot proffered the crate, saying, "Take this food and return to Security."

"Thank you," said Michael automatically. Out of alternatives, he took the crate and returned to the Security section. Using his pocket multi-tool to pry off the lid, he saw that it contained twenty-four large metal cans labeled, "**RATION, EMERGENCY, SELF-HEATING.**"

Bemused, he looked one over carefully. It gave no indication of its planet of origin – or its date of origin, for that matter. All it said was "**TERIYAKI CHICKEN**" and a few lines of instructions.

Following them, Michael pulled a tab at one end and waited. After a couple of minutes, a metallic buzzing indicated that his meal was ready. He unscrewed the can into three pieces: teriyaki chicken, chocolate cake, and a miscellany including paper napkins, a spork, instant coffee, toilet paper, a pack of cigarettes that, judging from the smell, was made from tobacco and at least one other herb that he couldn't identify. The cross-eyed donkey on the label was not an encouraging sign.

The chocolate cake was inedible, but the teriyaki chicken wasn't bad. After a while, he figured out that the ration tin could be screwed back together and the internal battery used to heat water in the compartment that had held the miscellaneous items. A trip to the bathroom revealed the plumbing system still worked. He made himself a cup of instant coffee.

Hurriedly spitting out the first mouthful, he yelped, "You call that a beverage? It's more like an emetic! These rations are way past their sell-by date." As with many surveyors for the IEC, the

time spent alone in one-man ships had given him the habit of talking to himself.

“Well, back to work.” He hoped to come up with another idea as good as, “Feed me or let me go” had been, but in the meantime he’d take a look at the terminal to see if he could hack his way out. If no low-hanging fruit presented itself, he’d examine all the papers and equipment in the hope of finding a way of gaining control of the robots — or snookering his way past them. He sat down at the terminal.

It was still half an hour before his first scheduled radio check-in with his ship. Michael wondered how Xavieros was doing, and if Xavieros could do anything helpful. Xavieros couldn’t run for help on his own; Michael’s ship was not designed for single-man operation the way the IEC survey ships were, and Xavieros couldn’t navigate, anyway. Nor did the ship have weaponry capable of taking out the robots, except for its main guns. Maybe the robots would be careless in exposing themselves to laser fire and could be dealt with that way.

But only if the robots hadn’t dealt with Xavieros already. Michael hoped he was all right. He sighed and brought up the login screen.

11

K117C

Xavieros woke slowly. The refiner alarm was blaring endlessly. It was tamper-resistant. It would probably be easier to fix whatever was wrong than to silence it. Xavieros swore and got up very slowly. He had a terrible headache and felt sick.

The monitors indicated that no water was coming up the hose. Something was clogging the strainer at the river end.

Checking the security cameras to make sure no natives were in the area (though the motion alarms had not been triggered), Xavieros saw that the end of the hose and the area below the nearest riverbank were not visible in the picture, masked by the river's shallow canyon. He gulped down some painkillers, put on sunglasses and a pair of sneakers, and stumbled out the airlock.

The sun was almost on the horizon. The air was hot, very hot, and bone-dry. Xavieros glumly went down the accommodation ladder and followed the hose down to where it plunged down the steep bank to the river. He climbed down the bank, one hand on the hose to steady himself. At the edge of the water, he hauled in the hose.

Well, there was the problem! A sheet of plastic was wrapped around the strainer. Probably an Imperial garbage bag. The suction must have drawn it in, and of course the damned bag was intact after four hundred years, because Imperial stuff was like that. He bent over to pull it off, and never saw the muscular native with red-rimmed eyes who stepped out from behind a bush and raised a short sword with a grey blade. The sword suddenly emitted a high-pitched whine. With a controlled, almost languid swing, the swordsman removed Xavieros' head.

* * *

Mayor York heaved Xavieros' body aside, removed the garbage bag from the strainer, and waded into the river, placing the strainer at just the right spot. The water level might fall, and he wanted his new ship to be full to the brim with liquid hydrogen fuel. Satisfied, he climbed the bank and looked around. No robots.

He climbed the accommodation ladder silently and entered the ship through its open airlock. That was a bit of luck. Moving like a ghost, he checked every compartment in the ship for additional crew. None: the ship was empty.

Now it was time to re-key the airlock and shut down the ship. Bad things might happen if it were left unattended, and of course the fusion reactor would consume itself to no purpose if left at high standby.

It had been a long time since York had dealt with a space ship. Along with his younger brother, he had joined a raider from Dancel when he was young, and spent six years away from home. He had been particularly good at boarding actions and other close fighting, for he had a deep reserve of ferocity that he could summon at need. His favorite weapon, then as now, was a power sword, an Imperial unit with a unbelievably sharp vibrating ceramic blade that could cut through steel. He'd been valued by his shipmates for his skills, and he might have stayed longer if his brother hadn't been killed in that brawl on Fort Neirad.

Several hours of frustrating trial and error later, York had shut down the ship and re-keyed the airlock. He had never been very good with engineering systems, and this San Vincentan ship was very different from the Persol raider he had served in. But the ship had been designed to be easy to shut down, and he had

figured it out in the end. He left the ship dead and silent except for the refiner, which continued to pump water and convert it into liquid hydrogen fuel. York would have to return every few days to check the fuel level, and shut off the refiner when the tanks were full. Refiners were expensive to operate and had a limited life, so they needed to be turned off when the time came. Too bad he lacked piloting skills, because this was no place to store the ship.

The sun was on the horizon when York locked the door and climbed down the accommodation ladder. He was just in time. He was barely a quarter of a mile away when one of the robots raced up to the ship. It circled the ship and jeepster once, then darted forward and did something to the accommodation ladder. Then it spun around and did something to the jeepster's window. Finally, it vanished into the distance.

Unable to control his curiosity, York returned to the ship. In the gathering gloom he could just make out the writing on the orange notice the robot has stuck onto the railing of the accommodation ladder. It read:

NOTICE #IN583922.0322

This vehicle is illegally parked at a military installation. It must be moved at once. Penalties for this infraction may include warnings, fines, impoundment, imprisonment, and summary execution.

Instant Obedience is the Hallmark of a Free People

Long Live the Emperor!

Michael had been sound asleep when the endless tomb-like silence was shattered by a series of explosions. He leapt to his feet, wild-eyed and shaky with sudden adrenaline. He peered over the redoubt he had made of the boxed bars of gold. Whatever was happening was far from his strange prison--at the moment. He put on his discarded combat armor with clumsy fingers. The routine of donning the complex, space-suit-like armor calmed him, and his hands stopped shaking well before he put on his helmet and energized the electronic and medical systems. He left his visor up to allow him to see and hear better, and strapped on his plasma pistol, useless though it was without ammo. He crossed the dusty Security lobby, entered the dogleg in the exit and peered around the open doorway. As he expected, the robot that had so patiently imprisoned him for the last two weeks was gone. The dim, rubble-strewn corridor was empty.

Perhaps five minutes had passed since the gunfire had begun. At the moment everything was quiet. Should he make a run for it? Probably, he decided. Unless the attack had been very well planned, the security robots would win, and if he stayed put he would be no better off than before. But even an ill-planned attack would distract the robots and give him a chance to flee. Two

flights of stairs and two and a half corridors might be all that separated him from the surface and freedom.

He went back to the Security lobby and pocketed one of the hated field rations and a bottle of water. It might take him a while to get all the way back to the ship. He dithered briefly about his plasma pistol, then decided to leave it behind. The robots would concentrate on the most threatening targets, and an empty pistol looked like as much of a threat as a loaded one.

He had just unsnapped the flap of his holster when there was an explosion outside. A figure in combat armor raced into the room and flattened itself against the wall.

After a moment the figure lifted its faceplate. It was a young woman with a porcelain complexion and dark eyes. Michael had never seen her before. She looked startled. "Hello. I didn't expect to find anyone here."

"The robots don't come in here," said Michael. "They've been programmed not to."

"I wouldn't bet on it. We seem to have triggered their contingency orders by mistake," she said, peeking back around the corner for a moment. She then changed clips on her plasma pistol, holstered it, and turned her attention to the room she was in. She took in the pile of crated gold bars with satisfaction, then noticed the large box overflowing with empty ration tins.

She turned back to him. "I'd say it's time you got out of here. Come on -- we'll make a dash for my friends." She smiled at him; a shy smile, strangely out of place under the circumstances.

Michael's heart gave a lurch. Her brown eyes were filled with concern for him.

She added, "My name is Beverly di Mendoza."

The name hit him like a blow. "Michael di Roma," he said automatically. Then, "I...I'm afraid I'm your enemy."

She stepped over to him and took his gloved hand in both of hers. "It's all right," she said. "We'll deal with it later. Give me your parole for the moment and we'll get you out of here."

"I..." he started, not knowing if he was going to agree or refuse. The sound of laser fire grew loud in the corridor.

Beverly snapped down her faceplate. "Are you ready?" she asked, her voice coming through her helmet's loudspeakers.

Struggling with an odd mixture of relief and guilt at the interruption, Michael also dropped his faceplate. "I'm out of ammo." he said.

"Here, take these!" She gave him a handful of clips from one of her pockets.

Michael slammed a clip into his pistol and pocketed the rest.

Beverly moved to the doorway, turning her back on him, and peeked into the corridor again. She beckoned. "Come on!"

They ran into the hallway. At the corner they could see the security robot that had been Michael's jailer. It was facing up the other corridor, at right angles to them, its turret out of sight around the corner. The robot was not moving with its former nightmarish rapidity, but it was leaping and ducking to avoid the incredible volume of laser and plasma gun fire pouring down the other corridor. One of its rear eyes swiveled toward them as soon as they were in view, but it concentrated on its targets up the other hallway. Two of its legs were gone and smoke was pouring out of cracks and joints in its insectile carapace, but it was firing steadily at its unseen targets.

Beverly said, "Just fire where I fire, and we might be able to take it out." She took careful aim at a spot between the second and third pairs of legs, one-third of the way up from the belly. She set her plasma pistol to full automatic and emptied a forty-five-round clip into the dancing, weaving robot in little over a second. Incredibly, every round went into an area smaller than the palm of her hand.

Michael was taken aback by this demonstration. *My father never had a chance.* With an effort he shoved his roiling emotions aside and focused on the task at hand. He fired at the robot, using fifteen-round bursts at first, then, realizing that the robot would take a lot of killing, also switching to full automatic. His grouping was nothing like Beverly's. Their combined fire was trifling compared to that coming from the heavy weapons of Beverly's unseen friends up the hallway.

Beverly poured in a second clip, then a third, then a fourth, changing clips and firing with a practiced fluidity that Michael found distracting. He had just loaded his third clip when the robot emitted an enormous screech like a thousand factory whistles blowing at once. Beverly grabbed him and pulled him back into the security area just before an explosion rocked the entire building. The lights flickered. Billows of dust rising from the floor met a shower of rubble from the ceiling.

After a moment, two figures in powered battle armor came bounding into the room, their armor pitted and smoking, their faceplates warped, and many of their accessories slagged down. One of them had a problem with a leg servo and was moving with a brisk mechanical limp, while at the same time roaring with laughter in a hoarse alto.

"Jesus, Briggs!" the figure hooted, "That was great! Let's find another god damned robot and do it again!"

Beverly opened her faceplate in spite of the dust and said, mildly, "Michael, I'd like you to meet my good friend Peer Sandra O'Hare and Sergeant Briggs. Sandy, Briggs, this is Michael...di Roma, wasn't it? He helped take out the robot for us."

Sandy started to slap Michael on the back, remembered she was in powered battle armor, and stopped herself just in time. "Glad to meet you, Mike," she said. Then, "God damn, Briggs, I thought you were a goner when the robot's turret blew off. I've never seen anyone duck so fast in my life!" She began laughing

again, shaking her head, her helmet servos whining with every movement.