

CARRIER

by Kevin J. Anderson

In the dark shadows of the long-dead bridge, she found the captain's last log entry. Hesitantly, her fingers trembling with excitement, she punched the few buttons she had deciphered on the dusty control panel, feeding the log tape into her portable JR computer extension.

"Would you translate that for me please, Junior?"

"I will try, Mary Coven," answered the computer via the linkup with the main JR on Coven's ship.

"If you can do it, I'll let you call me just Mary."

"Thank you, Mary."

"Translate it *first*, Junior," she snapped, turning to look around the stiflingly small bridge of the derelict vessel, feeling the shadows push against her spacesuit.

On his first attempt to navigate the *Proud Mary*, Coven's ship, Junior had almost run them into the ancient craft. The derelict was a series of cylinders strung together like a long train, each marked with a bold, glowing red triangle. An intact starship of the Population I race — the find of the millennium!

Coven had hastily suited-up and boarded the other ship, moving from compartment to compartment in awe, trying to figure out who would build a starship that seemed to be half sickbay, half morgue. Time had changed anything organic into a thin coating of dust; but the beautiful, desperate paintings that covered the walls stood undisturbed by the time that had passed since the artist had added his atoms to the dusty floor.

Magnificent alien landscapes swept across the ship's walls, somehow conveying that the artist knew he would never see home again. Coven blinked. She had murals like that on the walls of the *Proud Mary* — but this artist had stopped suddenly, in the middle of a painting. She briefly wondered why; but then she found the bridge, and excitement made her forget her concern.

A Population I ship, she grinned in amazement even though the craft was not as remarkable as imagination and rumor had made them out to be. The ancient race, built almost into demigods by wild stories and fantastic speculation, had completely vanished, leaving behind only tantalizing scraps of their dead civilization.

Earth, in its undying quest to gather knowledge, built what it called the Astro-Archaeology Foundation to assimilate those tiny fragments of Population I scattered so thinly about the explored portion of the Galaxy. When the artifacts came in too slowly to keep the Foundation busy, the "Star Search" was instigated, offering large sums of money to those people who might not otherwise look hard enough, when the only incentive was doing one's duty for all humanity.

Now, as she took in this ancient ship, Mary Coven could call herself the most successful of all the scavengers who had scoured space for any scrap that might be connected with Population I. She wondered how many people would kill to be where she was now.

"Hurry up, Junior!"

Coven had found a different artifact once before, a small plasticene scrap of an art object, half-buried in the wastes

of a backwater planet. The plasticene had been painted with the tantalizing picture of a human-looking arm decorated with fine red lines.

With the generous reward she had received from the "Star Search" fund, Coven had bought herself a new JR computer, choosing one with a personality rather than the more efficient standard model. Hell, she could *fly* the ship herself; what she really needed was someone to talk to. It got lonely on some of those long flights. She just wished Junior wasn't so naive at times.

"All finished, Mary."

"Well, play it then!"

A viewscreen on Junior's console lit up as an image of the Population I captain formed. He looked vaguely human, with greyish skin and a turned-up nose; but his face and arms were covered with livid red lines, searing into his body, eating him away. He trembled and spoke in a shaky tone. Junior's calm, artificial voice filled in the English equivalents, drowning out the captain's alien character.

"If you listen to this recording, I shed grief that you have ignored our clear warnings of the red three-corners. We are a plague ship! And if you have intruded into our environment, you too have the disease. Do not return to your origin!"

"Sorry buddy, some of us are bright enough not to take off our spacesuits." Coven commented under her breath.

"We, the first victims, isolated ourselves at the outbreak of the plague, hoping to save our race — but we were too late. We are quarantined, and the pestilence burns through all worlds, killing off my people. They are all dying...dying..."

The screen flickered, then turned grey. "I have another, very short clip tagged onto the end of this tape, Mary. Would you like to hear it?"

"Go ahead."

The captain's image appeared again, and this time the disease had ravaged him so that he could barely remain seated in his chair. "I have worked much thought into the possibility that a survivor might find our plague ship and rebirth the disease. I have made it so that this ship will self-destruct when the last of us dies. Oh — untranslatable, Mary, but I believe it is an alien expletive — why am I even recording this?"

The screen winked out. Coven looked around herself, touching the control panel to make sure it was still solid. "Junior, this ship seems quite un-self-destructed to me. Or am I mistaken?"

"I will run a check, Mary."

As the JR hummed, Coven looked around the haunting ship, admiring a few of the shadowy paintings in the pools of light scattered down the corridor. The thin, filmy dust, all that remained of the quarantined victims, showed her footprints clearly.

Junior spoke, breaking the silence. "I have found a small malfunction in the self-destruct sequence — but I have corrected it."

Coven froze. "What?"

"My programming specifically instructs that I correct malfunctions as I find them, Mary. You know that. I did not do anything wrong, did I?"

"Oh, Junior! How much time is left?"

"Thirty-two alien time units."

"Well, how long is an 'alien' time unit?"

"I will check through the main library. One moment, Mary...."

"NO!" She grabbed the portable console and sprinted toward the airlock that connected to her ship. Her finger punched the hatch release, but it would not open.

The tinny voice of JR came through a speaker in the wall. "I can't let you through until you have been properly decontaminated, Mary."

"Junior! Let me in."

"It is standard procedure, Mary."

"Then get us out of here!"

"Mary, I can not fly the ship all by myself. I was just installed, and you haven't taught me everything yet."

"Then let me in, dammit."

"But, Mary —"

"If you don't open this stupid hatch we'll both be....terminated!"

"Well....alright, Mary."

The JR grudgingly slid the airlock hatch into its recess, and Coven raced to the cockpit, leaping into her seat.



Rapid acceleration slammed her back against the chair as *Proud Mary* lurched away from the doomed craft.

The Population I plague ship turned into a sun behind them, casting wierd shadows through the viewscreens.

"All that knowledge...." Junior sighed.

"All that money." Coven moaned.

* * *

Mary Coven didn't look in mirrors much. Not that she was displeased with what she saw there — silver-brown hair, faint lines beginning to etch themselves around steely eyes — but she had no use for them. It wasn't until several days later that she noticed the red spiderweb of ruptured blood vessels beginning to trace its way along her cheeks, just like the captain of the Population I ship.

Her initial feeling of stricken helplessness lasted only a moment, as she stared at her reflection with a despairing outcry poised on her lips. Coven forced down the frantic thoughts blasting through her mind. Plague! She had the plague! She needed help, couldn't figure out the disease's cycle herself. She had to get back to Earth!

A cold chill crept through her as her composure returned. She didn't dare return to Earth. This disease had wiped out the entire Population I race. She just couldn't take the risk, vainly hoping that a cure could be found.

Coven made up her mind. She would go only within transmitting distance of Earth to tell them what had happened — she couldn't think of having *Proud Mary* placed on the list of missing ships — and to give them all the information she had taken from the Population I plague ship. Junior had at least gotten pictures of the ship, the log recordings, and a superficial gleaning from the library computer. She had contracted a deadly disease just to get that knowledge; someone may as well benefit from it.

Coven turned and looked wistfully at the murals covering her own walls, great vistas of the Alps, the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, the Black Forest, a South American jungle — thinking of similar paintings on the Population I ship. She never thought they looked so beautiful.

"Junior," Coven spoke quietly to the ship, leaning back in her chair with a sigh, "Did I ever tell you why I left Earth?"

"No, Mary."

"I grew up in a dirty, ugly city filled with dirty, ugly people. And when I had fought my way out of the slums to see the real world, I found that the rest wasn't so pretty either, not what I thought it would be at all. So I left." Coven looked again at the old vistas of Earth. Things might have been different if her expectations hadn't been so high.

Over the next few days, Coven watched the red intaglio of plague creeping down her cheeks and neck, beginning to lace her arms. Her hands had developed a bothersome trembling which she could not control, and, at times, she found it increasingly difficult to breathe.

* * *

The Earth fell away from *Proud Mary* like a shed tear. Coven had stopped only long enough to tell the authorities that she wouldn't be coming back, and to transmit the data Junior had obtained on the Population I ship.

The Astro-Archaeology Foundation immediately named her the recipient of

their most generous reward; Coven snapped into the transmitter, asking what in the world she was suppose to do with it.

"Shall we give it to your next of kin?" they had asked.

"If I had any next of kin, would I spend all my time out here alone?"

She listened to the confused pause. There had been someone once, but he had meant nothing to her. When he fell ill from some strange virus with a Latin name, she dragged him to the hospital, when everyone else would have left him to die in the alley, to rot and become compost for a new crop of garbage. Perhaps she should have left him; it would have saved the doctors the trouble of killing him. It was an accident, they said, we injected him with the wrong vaccine. It happened from time to time. They treated a lot of people and they couldn't be right every time. It was a good thing he had meant nothing to her. Coven was glad she could forget all about it.

The voice interrupted her thoughts, "Um....what shall we do with your monetary compensation, then?"

Coven thought of several things the stuffy bureaucrat could do with it, but answered, "Why don't you use it to make me a martyr? Build a statue and put it next to my memorial."

Where do you go to die?

* * *

A star named Meyer: a blood-red dwarf surrounded by a tight halo of rubble, scattered asteroids in nothing resembling an ecliptic. The faint star grew larger day by day, slowly becoming prominent across the rich field of stars ahead of the *Proud Mary*.

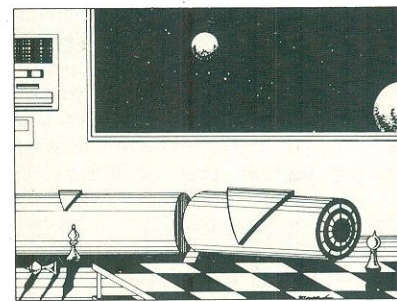
"Do you want to play another game of chess, Mary?"

"No, Junior."

"I promise I will not try so hard this time."

"I said no."

"But I'm bored, Mary."



"You can't be bored. You're a computer."

"Oh, well, you are bored, then."

Mary didn't answer.

The JR was silent for a few moments, then continued, "Do you know

there is another ship following us, Mary?"

She snapped up, looking out the viewport, but could see nothing in the dizzying infinity of stars. "What?"

"It started to follow about a day after we left Earth, when you delivered your message."

Coven scowled. "Tell it to go away."

"It refuses to acknowledge."

"Well, what kind of a ship is it?"

"Similar to ours, only slightly more efficient. We cannot outrun it — and it is slowly gaining on us."

"The pilot certainly doesn't want to go to Meyer. I've been there and, believe me, it's not the party spot of the Galaxy. It's got some broken asteroids around it, and I'm hoping to find a comfortable one. But what does that idiot want?"

Silence fell on the ship as Junior paused, trying to communicate with the other ship. "He says he wants to dock."

Coven almost jumped, her arms shaking as the red lines burned their way down into her marrow. "Is he crazy? Tell him to kiss off, Junior."

Junior paused, as if uncomfortable. "But then he will be mad at me, Mary."

Coven pursed her lips, thinking. "All right, Junior. Check your charts and see if you can plot a roundabout route to Meyer. Now let me talk to that Burnhead following us, and when I signal, hit the brakes and change course. That should throw him off."

"Hit the brakes, Mary?"

"Decelerate rapidly. At the speed we're going, his ship will be out of range before he realizes we've made a complete fool out of him."

Coven frowned smugly as the JR opened a direct comlink to the other ship. She refused to allow a visual link-up, waiting until Junior said the man on the other end was listening.

"Look, Space cadet, I've got the plague! You don't want to see me. Everything I got from Population I has been sent to Earth. You're wasting your time — now *leave me alone!*"

Coven signalled to one of Junior's optical sensors, then braced herself as *Proud Mary* lurched onto a new course. She watched as the following ship blazed past like a bullet to vanish instantly in the distance.

"Bye, bye, sucker."

* * * * *

Meyer loomed ahead of them like a drop of clotting blood. Junior analyzed the scattered clumps of asteroids, checking out some of the major ones, searching for a place for Coven to stay.

They entered the outer fringes of the distorted belt, passing into the thin forest of rocks. Junior's voice sounded anxious as he broke Coven's bleary silence in the cockpit.

"It is not my fault, Mary."

Coven looked up and tried to focus her eyes behind the pounding in her head. "What isn't your fault, Junior?"

"Our friend is back."

She stiffened, her fingers clenching convulsively in the grip of the advancing plague. "How?"

"He had a fairly good idea of where we were going, Mary."

"How close is he?"

"Still far from visual range, but he has definitely found us."

"Well, lose him again!"

"How, Mary?"

She drew in a deep breath. A muscle on her neck twitched violently. "All right, Junior, pay attention. I'm going to give you a lesson on how to get rid of a pain in the ass!"

"I have no bodily parts, Mary."

"Shut up and listen. Find a dense concentration of asteroids and shoot through them, placing them between us and his line of sight. Then alter course to find another tight cloud of rocks and do the same thing a couple of times until he has no way of knowing where we are."

Coven slumped in her chair, fighting to keep her vision straight. Over the days it had taken to finally reach Meyer, her arms had developed a perpetual trembling that occasionally turned into a seizure. Deep-seated headaches dug into her mind, and her vision blurred often. She had given up looking in the mirror, and tried not to notice the livid red tracery engraved into her arms. Junior now had almost complete control over the *Proud Mary*, and now Coven's conscience nagged at her for trusting the inexperienced JR to do stunt-flying in the asteroid field. But she certainly could not have done any better herself.

"Now what, Mary?" Junior repeated, and Coven realized she had passed out briefly. Junior had taken them through several passages of asteroids.

Coven's mind spun as she tried to remember what she had planned. "Okay, Junior. Now plot a typical orbit around one of those asteroids and inject us into it. Kill all the engines, and we'll drift in the arms of the Holy Laws of Physics for a while. He has no way of seeing that we're not just another rock, unless he comes into visual range of us. And the chances of that are"

"Would you like me to calculate

them, Mary?"

"No! Just get off my back!"

* * * * *

Proud Mary drifted in an elliptical orbit for a day and a half, undisturbed, slowly wheeling around the red star Meyer. Mary Coven passed through fits of violent trembling, throbbing headaches. And the broken scarlet lines seemed to sear deeper into her skin. She alternated periods of tranquilizers and stimulants, trying to decide which worked better.

Junior's insistent voice brought her out of a half-conscious state, slumped in the cockpit. Coven opened bleary eyes and fixed her gaze on the mural of the Badlands for a long moment before acknowledging.

"I think I have found a suitable asteroid for you, Mary."

"Give me some statistics."

"It is a sun-grazer of greater-than-average mass. It has a temporary atmosphere, like a comet, now that it's near the star, mostly nitrogen and some oxygen. Mean surface temperature is 13 degrees centegrade."

Coven nodded, focusing her attention. "A little chilly, but what can I expect?"

"It will be able to support you for a few months before it gets too close to the star. During perihelion, the entire surface will be molten."

Coven smiled grimly. "That's what I wanted. I don't want anybody else to come here and catch my little cold. Besides, it looks like I won't be needing a place for more than....a short while."

"Shall I take you there, Mary?"

"What are you waiting for?"

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Dust settled around the *Proud Mary*, slowly clearing before the viewports; and Coven looked out at the asteroid she had chosen. She took the last four of her stimulants, found an oxygen mask, and told Junior she wanted to go outside.

"I must warn you, Mary, to take the proper precautions. You may become exposed to contaminated air."

Coven huffed. "Junior, haven't you been *listening?* I've already got the damned plague!"

The JR didn't answer, but instead slid open the first airlock hatch. Coven stepped inside the chamber and waited to be cycled through. The second hatch opened, and she stepped onto new soil.

Coven smiled ironically and spoke. "I hereby name you asteroid Quarantine."

The blood-red sheen of Meyer thickened the sky to a viscous purple, staining the lifeless scattered rocks in

an eerie forest of shadows. The landscape was woven and broken, much like her, and she shivered in the chilly air. Then she decided to build a campfire as she had seen in some of the old pictures, and smiled in a burst of unwelcome nostalgia.

After convincing Junior to leave the double hatch of *Proud Mary* open, Coven collected a pile of combustibles and cleared a campsite within a cluster of rock pinnacles near the ship. Gritting her teeth to help control her trembling hands, she tried to light the pile of charts, cushions, and scrap paper, finally succeeding.

Coven leaned back against a cold rock, staring deep into the fire that was struggling to stay lit in the small oxygen content of the air. Brilliant points of light sparkled above her, other asteroids moving with Quarantine around the red dwarf. The dead asteroid was deeply silent. She couldn't even hear her own breathing.

A muffled sound came from inside the ship, as if Junior was calling to her; but Coven ignored it, trying to resist the clutches of unconsciousness that tugged at her. The stimulants weren't working.

A noise appeared off to her side, clear and unexpected in the thin air. She roused herself, then turned to look with reluctant, unfocusing eyes on a man, sealed completely behind the black visor of a full spacesuit. He stepped out of the shadows and walked towards her. Even here he had followed.

"Mary Coven."

Shock paralyzed her for an instant as she gagged on a quick gasp of air. Her limbs shuddered violently, but somewhere she found the strength to lurch to her feet and run. Her breath was almost gone, and the cold, filtered air of Quarantine stabbed at her deteriorating lungs.

She danced across the broken, low-gravity surface, winding her way through mazes of fallen rocks. The man followed, but his bulky spacesuit slowed his pursuit. Coven pulled ahead, hoping she would lose him in the jumbled labyrinth of broken rock, wondering how he could possibly have found her — but then she realized how few asteroids around Meyer were capable of supporting life.

Coven quickly became exhausted. Her body shuddered, finding it almost impossible to breathe in the grip of the disease. She stumbled, falling to the rocky dust as both knees gave out simultaneously.

In the distance behind her, she could hear the clank of the man's heavy boots as he crunched across the sur-

face, following her. Desperately, she crawled into a shallow cave, hoping to hide in the shadows. Trembling, she fell against the far wall, shuddering with another seizure, her very marrow trying to crawl out of her bones.

He stood silhouetted in the cave opening, a bulky figure against the bloody sky. "You can't run away anymore, Mary."

She picked up a rock from the floor and threw it, trying to smash his black faceplate. But her trembling arm sent the stone flying off to the man's side.

"No violence now!" he snapped.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"You have something from Population I. As a fellow scavenger, I want it."

"I told you, Burnhead, I gave everything to Earth! I have nothing left!"

"You have the *plague*," he answered quietly and moved toward her.



In Coven's shocked silence, he removed a medical kit from his suit and fumbled with a syringe in thickly-gloved hands. He grabbed her red-laced arm and jabbed the needle into her skin, beginning to draw blood.

"The 'Star Search' charter specifically states that they will pay substantially for *any* remnant of the Population I race. And this is the virus that destroyed them. What could be more important than that?"

He paused, looking into her wide, steely eyes from behind his opaque mask. "Think of how much we can learn about their physiology just by studying the disease that killed them off. Since you have declined your reward, I'm sure the Foundation will be much more generous with my own compensation."

Coven found her outrage was enough to let her shout at him. "You're crazy! What if the plague gets loose? It'll destroy the human race just like it wiped out Population I!"

The man filled a second vial of blood, poking her other arm when one artery seemed to run dry. "They'll take the proper precautions. Don't be such a pessimist."

"I grew up in the slums, Buddy-boy.

I am, by definition, a pessimist."

The man didn't listen. He clipped the two vials of blood into his medical kit and carefully sterilized his equipment. "Thank you, Mary Coven."

She cried out after him. "You're botching up my entire sacrifice! I might as well have gone back to Earth and died in a comfortable hospital bed."

He turned his faceless helmet at her. "We all make bad judgements." And then he was gone.

* * *

Coven stayed in the cave a long time before she slowly got up on unsteady legs and began to stumble back to the *Proud Mary*. The doors were still wide open, and Junior's voice was incessantly calling for her.

"Mary! Mary!"

She went haltingly inside, blood rushing painfully to her head. She stopped the JR's excited chatter. "I know, Junior. He's already gone."

The computer paused as if waiting to spring a surprise. "But he'll be back."

She lifted her eyes to one of the speakers, frowning, then wincing as pain shot through her body. "What?"

"I thought you might like some company, rather than being alone on this asteroid. So, after he had left his ship, I contacted his computer — a primitive thing: no personality, able to do only its main functions, unable to stand up even to the weakest argument — and reprogrammed it. Shortly after takeoff, his computer will direct the thermal energy from his engines into the cockpit, quickly raising the temperature to about three hundred degrees centigrade."

Junior's voice seemed to hint that he took pride in his new understanding of human nature. "So, the pilot will decide he was much more comfortable here on Quarantine — and he will come back to you, Mary."

Coven stared at the JR console, eyes wide. "Three *hundred* centigrade! Junior! He is a biological organism. At that temperature we....we combust!"

A flicker of light caught her eye, and she looked up into the purplish sky to see a brilliant shooting star falling back to the asteroid.

"I am sorry, Mary." Junior sounded crushed. "Did I do something wrong again?"

Coven absently rubbed her arm where the man had taken blood. Then she slowly forced a smile, wondering if Junior was truly as naive as he seemed to be or — ?

"No, Junior. You did just fine."

