

The Franchise

By Julie E. Czerneda

Sequel to *In the Company of Others*

First published in 2004 in *Space Stations* edited by John Helfers and Martin H. Greenberg, DAW Books I present this story here for your reading pleasure. While I hope you enjoy “The Franchise,” I ask you to please respect that I in no way relinquish my rights to this story, characters or worlds.

After finishing In the Company of Others, I received a veritable flood of mail asking for a sequel. While I was thrilled readers enjoyed the story enough to want more, I'd always intended it to stand on its own and to end as it does, so I had mixed emotions whenever I replied. Part of me was, well, it's over. That's it. Done exactly as it was meant to be. But part of me regretted I had nothing more for the readers who wanted it.

When John invited me to this anthology, it felt like a gift. To me, the great station in Company had been a character in its own right. Not only that, there was a secondary character who continued to hang around in my head. If I put them together, I could explore what happened to everyone else from the story. And I did. The writing of this was immensely satisfying. Perhaps, in a way, I needed a little sequel too.

You don't need to have read In the Company of Others to read this story, and it doesn't contain horrid spoilers, though there are some. But I hope you read the novel first. Because this is all the sequel there'll be – and I believe these few pages will touch your heart more deeply if you've been waiting for one. - Julie

]Titan University Archives[

]Public Access[

]Reference: Post-Quill Era; Colonization; Space Station Repatriation[

Once the menace of the Quill, the alien pest accidentally and tragically released on the terraformed planets, had been overcome, and the first of these worlds declared free of the deadly Quill Effect, it was with relief and enthusiasm that humanity undertook Phase Four: colonization. There were, of course, minor details to be settled before full, unrestricted immigration could be instituted. During the two decades of Protective Isolation, the great transit stations had sheltered hundreds of thousands of would-be immigrants. These individuals were now eager to resume their chosen destiny. Earth, and all of Sol System, wished to reestablish routine travel via the stations to the new worlds, but some stations had fallen into disrepair. Fortunately, all affected agencies worked in harmony to move colonization and station repatriation forward as expeditiously as possible. Humanity's Great Dream had begun anew and the transit stations would prove key to making that dream a reality.

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]Titan University Archives[

]Excerpts from briefings conducted by Assistant Secretary Wayne Umberto[

]Access Restricted to Clearance AA2 or higher[

... It's clear the 16 transit stations presently – viable -- will be granted self-governing status as the public demands. Your task in this negotiation, sir, will be to obtain a firm understanding – however worded -- that this enfranchisement is conditional upon those stations assuming responsibility for repatriating the non-viable ones. It's a salvage stationers are uniquely qualified to undertake and our experts predict a success rate of 30%.

There is the obvious added benefit of relieving the extreme population pressure within the surviving stations. Less apparent, but no less critical, sir, is that the System Universities and TerraCor, by providing crucial transport and technical support, will re-establish a permanent presence on the stations before they become too independent. The stations must remain service-oriented facilities, to be expanded or decommissioned as we see fit, not become homes...

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“Doesn't make much sense,” Annette whispered.

“What doesn't?”

“Him. Here.”

Dave Bijou didn't need to follow the slide of his wife's eyes to know who took up the first bench in the Earthers' fancy-new shuttle. The rest from Thromberg Station squeezed four-together, despite the Earther crew's uncomprehending stares and their provision of only two safety restraints per seat. Elbow room was a not-yet accepted luxury; companionship was more reassuring.

Only the old ones remembered when it had been otherwise, more particularly, the Sol-born, who'd come to the station thirty years ago.

Sammie would remember, Dave told himself, thinking of the man alone and silent, back to them all. Samuel Leland, former proprietor of Sammie's Tavern, Outward 5, Thromberg Station. Undisputed leader of that community and least likely to ever leave it. Forty years since dirtside, some claimed. Could have been longer. On-station since Thromberg powered up, most believed. Rumor said he'd been an educated, cultured businessman, one with connections and backers in plenty on Earth.

Hadn't mattered. The past wasn't currency worth spending on any station during the Quill Blockade, when everyone had been quarantined to prevent spread of the pest to Earth and Sol System, even if no station had ever held a Quill. A liability was more like it, in an environment where pasts no longer carried shields of family, property, or place. The survivors learned early to deal in the here and now.

For the same reason, the future hadn't been a popular topic for casual talk, given the lack of it. Then, suddenly, the universe changed. The Quill were no longer a threat. The blockade had been lifted! *People could leave!*

Those with somewhere to go.

Dave sighed at the memory. He and Annette had been among those betrayed by their pasts. They were both station-born, to immie parents; another meaningless legacy, since it turned out to be *where* you were born that mattered.

Thromberg Station might have rioted again, when this became painfully clear. It came close. *His* voice, Sammie’s, and others, insisted on reason. Might have been ignored, Dave admitted to himself, but even the angriest of them quieted at the return of those who’d desperately raced to the new worlds, only to discover themselves unable to endure the reality of sky, moving air, and distance. Their shamed, exhausted relief to be within walls proved desire wasn’t nearly enough.

The Earthers brought tests to oh-so-kindly weed out those unsuited to life dirtside. Kindness. Dave didn’t make the rude noise this called for, considerate of his seatmates. Station folk – stationers, immies, ‘siders, alike – knew the motive behind this convenient “kindness.” Those stranded these last 20 years deserved and received first immigration rights without question. But Earth and Sol System hadn’t stayed sterile. A new generation waited impatiently to become colonists. The stations’ relics would have to hurry or lose their chance.

So they’d lined up for the tests. Outsiders passed, those who’d fled the blockade around Sol System only to be exiled in turn to Thromberg’s outer hull because the station feared to let them back inside, in case they carried Quill. Why else would Earth fire on defenseless civilian ships? ‘Siders were used to living with horizons, those of their ships and the station herself. First of many ironies, since most ‘siders weren’t interested in life dirtside, preferring a return to the independence of space. The First Rounders passed, to no one’s surprise, being those colonists pre-selected for experience outdoors and bloody determination. But while ‘rounders might be young enough to tame a world, they were too old to populate it.

The rest? Stationers and immies born in that last generation, before the Earthers added sterilization drugs to food shipments with the foresight of hysteria, ran headfirst into the new blockade: most could never live outside a station’s comforting walls. With a guilt no one mistook for generosity, Thromberg was officially given to those who now had to call it home forever.

Of course there was a catch. The stationers expected one. Perhaps they felt better knowing it.

The waves of immigration to the terraformed worlds would need the transit stations – all of them. To keep the stations which had survived, they would have to restore those which had not.

Starting with the most infamous – Hamilton Station.

Dave found himself holding Annette’s hand. She leaned closer, nestling her small head into his shoulder. They’d almost backed out of the deal when their destination had been revealed. Hamilton had turned on its own, corridor-talk said, in riots more deadly than any which had ripped Thromberg. The last communication from the station had been a final, endlessly cycled: “Do not approach.” A series of aid ships from Earth had tried, and never been heard from again. The other stations, consumed with their own troubles, had left well enough alone. Borrowing trouble was not a survival skill.

Until now, when the Earthers wanted Hamilton Station up and running again.

If Sammie hadn't been in the room, rock-calm and scornful, maybe all of those in this shuttle, and the dozen paralleling their course, would be still on Thromberg.

Annette was right, Dave thought uneasily, looking at Sammie's wide, bowed shoulders. It didn't make any sense. Why *him*? And why *here*?

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Linda Gulliver, former Patrol recruit at the top of her class, now one of two passenger attendants on TerraCor Shuttle 881 -- the need for new patrollers to guard Sol System approaches having been extinguished with the Quill threat -- steeled herself and reached for the door control.

“C'mon. It's not that bad,” teased fellow attendant Pavel Romanov. Despite his lean height, he managed to make the crew cot look comfortable. There were six lining what had been a spacious corridor between the shuttle's bridge and the back passenger hold. Linda wouldn't willingly lie in one without taking a sleepy beforehand. She said her legs cramped within minutes; no one's business if she couldn't bear lying so near anyone else.

“It's worse,” she told Pavel, unsmiling. “We contracted to transport thirty-three passengers and their gear, not sixty-five. We're supposed to use some of the passenger hold for ourselves, let alone give up our quarters. And have you smelled it in there today?”

“The ship's rated for twice what we've on board. So we're tucked a little tight -- not as though it's a long trip.”

Linda snorted. “Where have you been the past three days?”

“Keeping you happy, Linda my girl,” he grinned, then pretended to duck.

“What's the holdup, Gulliver?”

Linda snapped to attention out of habit, then made herself relax. “Nothing, Captain,” she said to the woman entering from the bridge access.

Captain Gwen Maazel might not be patrol, but she was capable of the same searing look when in doubt. “See it stays that way.”

Linda collected her tray and went through to the passenger hold.

The portside aisle had been kept clear, safety as well as instant access to the suits webbed against that bulkhead. The starboard aisle was packed ceiling-high with belongings -- those from Thromberg resisting any attempt to move their tawdry things to the cargo hold. Not that there was much room in cargo, Linda reminded herself. Thromberg's docking personnel had jammed it with what they euphemistically called “gear,” a collection of patched, antique equipment the crew privately referred to as “garbage.”

Matched the passengers, Linda decided, firming her smile as she walked to the end of the passenger hold and began handing out drink tubes from her tray. All wore clothing that might have begun life similar to her own one-piece coveralls, but twenty years of wear and repair had morphed into strangely unique creations. A third were

sleeveless. Others had additional layers sewn or glued in various areas, as if for padding or reinforcement. Color? The fabric varied from faded and incidentally stained -- or scorched -- to faded with what appeared to be decorative stains. More common were loops or pockets filled with assorted objects, most looking the worse for wear, things which should have been discarded long ago. The occasional shiny, new object -- doubtless Earther issue -- was usually tucked into a pocket, as if there was some shame attached to its ownership, however functional.

Objects. Easier to deal with those. Linda had grown used to the way her passengers preferred to sit so they touched constantly, but the way their eyes slid away from hers when thanking her, the way they spoke too softly, too quickly, as if to be done with any conversation with an Earther, sent chills down her spine even after three days.

Their faces didn't help. The older ones, in the back four rows, had an uncompromising harshness in their eyes, an alertness as they watched her every move with disapproval -- not to mention appalling teeth when they did speak. The rest, none younger than Linda herself, were no better, each lean to the point of gaunt, many bearing scars from injuries or perhaps, she shuddered, disease. Such disfigurements hadn't been seen on Earth in her lifetime.

But the worst of them all was the passenger sitting in the front row. Linda braced herself and her smile as she came beside his seat.

Possibly he was alone because he needed the room. He'd been a big man. The frame was there: broad shoulders and chest, heavy, long arms that would have been muscled once. The torso was still thick, not as if he'd had more to eat than the others, but as if his skin remembered more bulk and refused to tighten. His teeth were mismatched and his face -- suffice to say age and the loss of underlying flesh hadn't been kind to what had started out as asymmetrical and blunt. The eyes tended not to focus. His coveralls were like the rest's, except for a lack of fading in the color of the front, as if he'd always worn something else overtop. Apron, she'd been told. He'd been a bartender on the other station. Linda avoided looking at his feet, one look at those splayed toes in their homemade thongs being enough.

He might have been alone in his seat because of his size -- or unpleasant appearance. But, Linda knew, incredible as it seemed, this *bartender* was the leader of the Thromberg contingent. He sat alone because the others here granted him that privilege. Something else to mystify the Earthers on board.

“Drink, Mr. Leland?” she asked.

His hand, like those of the others, reached involuntarily for a pocket, then stopped. It had taken those from Thromberg most of this trip to stop trying to pay her with the little slips of metal they called “dibs,” but the reflex remained. Since “dibs” involved a complex exchange of work for goods, Linda took this as a hopeful sign Thromberg had remained more civilized than it appeared from her denizens. There was little else to go by.

Though if she turned around, she knew she'd see no one drinking yet. They were waiting for Leland to take and open his. In fact, they used to wait until she left as well. Politeness? She wasn't sure.

Different customs. Very. They hadn’t briefed the crew to expect such things. Mind you, they hadn’t been briefed about much. This was supposed to be a routine, if profitable, pick up and transport trip – not an exercise in diplomacy with passengers who seemed, at times, more alien than the Quill.

“Thanks,” grunted Leland, taking the tube and cracking the top seal with a thumb. He didn’t look around at the echo as 64 other seals were cracked. “Whatssir ‘tinr’y?”

Linda worked this around, guessing “itinerary;” Leland’s broken speech was hard for her to follow at best. “We’ve dropped out of translight and are vectoring to the station, sir. Captain Maazel -- What was that?!” *That*, being a solid thump felt through the floor plates, accompanied by a warning flicker of the interior lights. She grabbed for a hold on the seat rim, almost dropping her tray.

In case any missed the event, the shuttle’s alarm gave a brief, self-conscious bleat.

Leland took a casual swallow before answering: “Sommat hit the hull,” he said, as if the event was irrelevant. “When’r we dock’n?”

“I’ll ask.” Linda straightened, embarrassed by the placid looks from the rest of the passengers, and almost ran from the hold.

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Those from Thromberg sat back and watched. They’d been told there were suits for everyone, plus a spare or two. As if any of them had believed that before boarding, Dave thought, then glanced at the port bulkhead to admire the flagrant wealth on display. Probably the Earthers were scrambling into their suits in the forward compartment. His panic-threshold required something a little more imminently threatening than a thump on the outside of a well-maintained ship. After all, if they’d been seriously holed, it would be a little late for suits. Earthers didn’t seem very logical folks.

Another *thud*. This a bit louder, with a *ssssshhhhk* at the end, as though something clung to the hull before being left behind. Like the other immies and stationers, Dave tilted his head, listening for signs the ‘siders in back were reaching for their own suits, carefully stowed by their seats. Then it’d be time to move, all right.

“Mr. Leland.” Dave looked forward with the rest. The voice was the Captain’s. She stood in the again-open doorway, this time partially suited up, two of the other crew behind her. Her expression made Dave tighten his grip on Annette’s hand. He felt Jean leaning closer on the other side. “Would you come with me, please?”

Sammie nodded, standing with an awkward lurch. “Pettersen,” he said, bringing one of the ‘siders up the aisle to him, bag in hand. “Rest o’ you don’t fuss,” he growled, running his eyes over them all. Dave nodded, knowing the others did the same.

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“What are we facing here, Mr. Leland?”

Linda sat shoulder-to-shoulder between her crewmates, Pavel and Lili Wong. The three weren’t directly involved in operations, so waited, strapped into their seats along the starboard side of the little bridge, their backs to one of two emergency air locks, helmets ready in their laps. Pavel, to her left, had snapped on her helmet’s tether,

muttering under his breath. Null-g was always a possibility – gravity generators were reliable but not perfect. She’d been more grateful than embarrassed. They were all distracted by the conversation and its cause.

The captain and the two from Thromberg had moved back from the ops stations, though their bodies still screened the displays. Linda didn’t need to see what was keeping the bridge somber and those less experienced swallowing repeatedly. The report had been whispered one to the other. What should have been the approach lane to the aft docking ring, their preferred access to Hamilton Station, was littered with debris.

Not just a hazard to ships.

The debris was *from* ships.

During the trip here, she’d looked over the stats. Hamilton Station was older than Thromberg by a handful of years, a difference reflected more in terms of interior decorating styles than any physical changes in design. What worked, worked. About a quarter of those carried by the shuttles were experts in station operations and should have no problem accessing Hamilton’s systems. *Stationers*. Linda couldn’t have told which they were.

Half were immigrants or their descendants. *Immies*. They had expertise of their own, as well as being willing hands. The rest? Not spacers. Not now. *Outsiders*, who’d existed during the blockade by attaching their ships to the exterior of Thromberg and bleeding off her power, air, and water. Parasites or survivors. Linda hadn’t made up her mind on that yet, thoroughly offended by the sight of so many starships turned into scrap, stuck at seeming random to Thromberg’s hull. Outsiders were easy to spot: their coveralls showed wear from suit connectors – the kind of wear that only came after unimaginable use. For some reason, only older ones had volunteered for life on other stations.

Like the one standing between Leland and the captain, introduced as Torbjørn Pettersen. Tall, skeleton-thin, with ragged white hair that had likely been blond, he hadn’t spoken, only consumed everything on the bridge with quick furtive glances.

“What are we facing, Captain?” Leland seemed oblivious to the startled looks his suddenly educated voice attracted, turning to his companion. “Torbjørn?”

Pettersen’s voice was equally cultured, but quieter, almost shy. “This is deliberate. They don’t want company.”

The captain leaned forward and consulted with the com operator, then straightened with a curse. “Approach to the stern ring is worse. We’ll have to move in slow, that’s all. This material is matching the station in speed and trajectory – shouldn’t be too difficult to do the same, and slide through the worst of it.”

The ‘sider stiffened. Leland held up a thick-fingered hand to stop whatever Pettersen might have wanted to say, instead reminding them unnecessarily: “Other ships didn’t make it.”

“These are asteroid mining shuttles, Mr. Leland, as requested by your station administration,” Captain Maazel countered. “My crew and I are used to working in heavy dust and particle areas – these ships can take a substantial amount of impact if we do the pushing.”

Linda should have been reassured by this, but something in the rigidity of the ‘sider’s back kept her hands clenched on her helmet. She hadn’t realized she’d meant to speak until hearing her own voice: “Captain, recommend we suit up the passengers before proceeding into the debris field. As a precaution.” Pettersen swiveled his head, washed-pale eyes expressionless.

Captain Maazel nodded, her attention on what she and the others watched. “Take Romanov. See there’s no panic.”

“No need,” Pettersen said, before Linda and Pavel could unstrap.

Leland explained: “If they need to suit up – they will. Let your people concentrate on getting us through this mess.”

To Linda’s disgust, Captain Maazel agreed, immediately gesturing them to stay as they were. It didn’t help when she took the ‘sider with her, forward in the bridge compartment, to engage the three ops crew in private discussion.

Leland had stayed behind. He walked over to stand in front of Linda, most of his bulk trespassing within her personal space. She tried not to stare up his nostrils, which were bent and populated by large, black hairs.

“We appreciate your concern, Linda Gulliver,” the stationer told her. “But you won’t get our people to move until those in the back rows give the word.”

“Why? Are they spacers?” Pavel’s voice contained something of awe. Linda supposed deep space explorers were exotic beasts to those used to plying the Mars-Titan run.

“‘Siders,” Leland corrected, propping an unwelcome thong-enclosed foot beside Linda’s thigh. “We each bring our skills to this adventure, Earther. Stationers to get Hamilton working, immies to bring the place to life again, and ‘siders --” he paused, his attention caught by something forward.

“—‘siders?” Linda prompted, even as she froze with alarm. Pettersen was tearing open the bag he’d brought, pulling out what appeared to be damaged bits of a spacesuit.

“‘Siders? They deal with disaster.” With this, Leland left them, hurrying to the others.

“So our passengers have nothing in common – no wonder they almost killed one another,” this from Lili, to Linda’s left.

“They have something in common,” Linda said almost to herself, trying not to be afraid. “They all survived.”

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The situation might have been death-imminent, or merely pandering to Earther-paranoia, but Dave couldn’t resist taking the time to enjoy the novelty of not only wearing a suit, but having such a fine one. He stroked its smooth, flawless sleeves and connectors. He could see most of the others doing the same, even Annette, who’d professed disdain for Earther extravagances. Their generation had experienced very little this new. He couldn’t imagine why the ‘siders chose to put on their own gear, taping up the untrustworthy seams, making do – but no one from Thromberg bothered trying to think like a ‘sider.

Finally, he put on the helmet, drawing in its fresh plastic smell with delight, only to freeze as words roared through his helmet com: “...the approach to Hamilton is not routine. Check seals; keep coms open. Repeat. The approach is not routine.”

Pettersen’s voice, the ‘sider who’d gone forward with Sammie. Calm, cold, staccato urgent. *Not routine*. Station code for anything about to turn deadly. Another ‘sider, now an unknown in a patched suit, began checking Annette’s suit. Dave felt a touch from behind as someone else checked his. Suit air didn’t taste the same, he found, fear drying his mouth.

The ‘siders pushed them out of the way, into the seats, a tighter fit with suit bulk and air tanks added, but workable with the addition of the back rows and Sammie’s. This done, the ‘siders, moving with reassuring ease despite their suits, grabbed bags and loose gear and passed it hand to hand, to be dumped into the compartment parallel to this one. Earthers’ crew quarters – bigger than most families used on Thromberg -- that they’d been using as a galley and exercise room. That door was closed and both aisles freed, but the ‘siders kept moving, this time opening up the rear door – an air lock giving access to the cargo compartment. Several went inside, and didn’t return.

Stationers and immies stayed put, silent, so the com could carry Pettersen’s continuing report.

“Sammie wants me to remind you we’re in the right ship to handle this – miners are built to shove their way through. Can take a fair hit as well, not that the crew plans to collide with anything avoidable. They might be Earthers, but they know their stuff.” This last with a wry reluctance that brought a chuckle from a few. “Might be some sudden maneuvers, loss of G.”

A pause, into which a question fell: “What’s out there?”

Dave listened hard, straining for anything past his own breathing and the suit’s background hum.

“Hamilton put up a fence, seems like,” came the slow answer. “Bit of a waste, if you ask me. Recyclables. Other – things.”

Hamilton Station hadn’t replied to their messages, or those from Thromberg. As far as anyone could determine, she couldn’t – a failure of equipment, knowledge, or, most likely, a lack of anyone to speak.

Dave now considered an even more terrifying possibility, given they were docking within the hour.

Maybe Hamilton chose not to answer.

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“Bodies????”

“Shh.” An unnecessary admonishment, since no one was paying attention to them, but Lili made it anyway. “That’s what Sinshi says. Thousands of them. Along with ship debris and who knows what else.”

“I thought they ate their dead,” Pavel hissed, leaning over Linda.

Common enough belief back home; a nightmare as they approached the grimly silent station. Linda shoved Pavel back. “You know that’s crap,” she said firmly but quietly. “Thromberg buried her dead by sending them towards her sun. They’re a posted ship hazard. Other stations did the same.” She’d been in a class debating if that had been respect -- or to avoid terrible temptation. People who’d know now shared the shuttle’s air supply with her.

Finding Hamilton had kept her dead close was not reassuring.

Seconds became minutes, the time crawling down Linda’s neck, arms, and legs like spiders she couldn’t brush away. The captain had ordered a slow, careful approach, passing that recommendation to the other ships. Agony, to sit, strapped in place --

Concussion!

The shuttle’s alarm covered any unprofessional outcries, profane or terrified. Linda locked her helmet into place as others did the same, cutting off ambient sound. Pettersen had put his on earlier, and now she knew why, hearing his voice, not the captain’s, in her ear.

“...stop the shuttle,” he was saying, no trace of emotion in his soft, quick voice. “Those are suits. They aren’t just bodies. They’re mines! Stop all your ships.”

The captain: “How can you know --”

Leland’s voice crashed over both: “Because we never had enough suits, Captain. No one would jettison one without damned good reason, let alone this many.” Emotion in plenty there, all of it dark. “Stop the ships! Now! Before we lose anyone else.”

“Too late --” someone shouted.

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Lights were half power -- on emerg, probably. Nothing new, Dave told himself, refusing to think about what *was* new about their situation.

“Don’t panic on me now,” Annette said, reading his state of mind with the accuracy of practice. She’d switched their coms to privacy – it hadn’t taken her long to puzzle out the helmet controls and take advantage of them. “You heard Pettersen and Sammie. The Earthers lost three shuttles --” a thickness to her voice the only acknowledgement of what else had been lost. Thankfully, station caution had insisted on several small ships, rather than the single large transport TerraCor had offered. “— ours stayed intact. Solid ship; smart flying. Gotta give the Earthers some credit. Dave. Are you listening?”

He nodded, exaggerating the motion through neck and shoulders so she could see it. “Good,” she snapped. More gently. “Counting on you, husband.”

“I’ll do my part,” he said gruffly. “If they get us into the station. Better switch us back to the general com.”

Her gloved hand rested on his, then his helmet filled with other voices again, this time in debate.

The Captain’s: “The docking ring is undamaged. At least fifteen ports show green and available. Tell me again, Mr. Leland, why we’re not to use them?”

“It’s another trap.”

“And you know this how?” the question courteous despite the tension.

The stationer didn’t hesitate. “Because we did the same on Thromberg.”

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Open coms had their disadvantages. Linda listened to Leland’s revelation and felt her stomach twist itself into a further knot. Docking ports were sacrosanct – the first rule of space was to give unquestioned access to air and safety. Arguments could be resolved later, if need be.

Thromberg’s actions had been against those who became the ‘siders, yet Linda heard Pettersen’s gentle voice supporting Sammie: “Hamilton doesn’t want visitors. Why would she leave her doors open and the welcome mat out?”

“So what can we do? Three shuttles are gone, Mr. Leland. Seven are incapable of translight without repair – two are bleeding air. We can’t just sit here and wait for help.”

“Your shuttles have ore grapples,” Pettersen said. “They can be fired into the outer hull and used to winch us tight. Then we’ll make our own door if necessary.”

“Sider methods.” If there was a note of horror in the captain’s voice, Linda was sure every Earther listening could echo it.

“I can attest they work, Captain,” this from Leland.

Grapples. Linda stared at the suited figures, all but one in pristine Earther suits. So. It was by no coincidence they were in a mining shuttle. The stationers had anticipated trouble docking with Hamilton all along, and had come prepared to do things their way.

It put the “gear” in cargo into an entirely new light. And her passengers – who were now anything but useless weight.

She unstrapped and stood, staggering a little as circulation returned to limbs tensed in one position too long. “Captain Maazel.”

“I’m busy, Gulliver --”

“I’ve had training in emergency hookups,” Linda interrupted. “I’d like to go back and help.”

“Beats sitting here,” this from Pavel. Linda felt more than saw Lili join them.

Pettersen turned. His battered helmet was lit a garish red from within, turning his face to that of some demigod. “Can you take orders from us, Earther?” he challenged.

“Mr. Leland said you were the experts in dealing with disaster, sir,” Linda refused to back down. “Looks to be what we have here.”

A noise from Leland, loud and rude, filled their helmets. “Got you there, Torbjørn. Go ahead, girl. If your captain’s no objection.”

“I object to everything except heading back to Thromberg,” Captain Maazel muttered darkly. “Gulliver – take these two and see if you can lend a hand.”

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Earthers had helped. Side-by-side in the holds; out there, on the hulls of ship and station, drilling in feeds to tap air, power, and water from Hamilton’s mains. Dave didn’t know what to make of it. It was happening on the other shuttles as well, reports said. It took exhausting hours, but eventually the ships were declared snug and secure. For now.

“Guess that makes us all ‘siders,” Annette had joked. They’d already begun thinking of themselves as stationers, not immies, acknowledging their futures would be on a station, not a world. Dave wasn’t quite ready to be a ‘sider, and had told her so, but he did appreciate their skills.

And the Earthers’.

He’d hoped for repercussions. Everyone hoped for a reaction from Hamilton Station to their assault on her hull. The com tech maintained a vigil. Nothing.

Meanwhile, the ‘siders, ever practical, made those who’d waited inside the shuttle take off their suits, move around, and insisted they eat. Everyone tucked some of their rations into pockets. The Earther, Linda, had watched this, then done the same.

Sensible woman, Dave decided. Annette must have agreed. She’d made conversation with the Earther, exchanged drink tubes in a gesture of acceptance as old as Thromberg, or perhaps older. Whether the Earther knew it or not, she’d be watched over as if one of their own.

[li #]

Linda rubbed sleep from her eyes as she went forward, contemplating using one of the two boost shots in her suit, then decided to save them for – what? She refused to speculate. The corridor lights were dimmed; only the glows above each door showed her where Pavel and Lili, along with the shuttle pilots, Steve and Marcus, were snoring in a discordant harmony in the cots -- strapped in place, still in suits, helmets hanging from tethers. *Not routine*, she’d heard the stationers whisper to one another, as though it was a warning. Appropriate.

Linda moved quietly past the others, tired enough to sleep without drugs, but unwilling to seek oblivion of any type until she knew and approved what was happening next. Not the best attitude for a humble shuttle attendant, she chided herself even as she slipped through the door to the bridge.

Pettersen had stretched out on the crew bench, eyes closed and one leg with its taped-on mag boot on the floor. Linda doubted he truly slept. The Captain and Leland were out of their suits, slumped but alert in the pilots’ chairs. The com tech huddled over her console, eyes half-lidded as she monitored something only she could hear.

“Hear you made yourself useful,” Leland said by way of greeting.

“Learned some things,” Linda replied. “Most not reg’.” The stationer’s unexpected smile was lopsided, exposing gaps in his discolored teeth; it warmed her anyway.

The captain’s voice was worn as thin as her face. “Sit,” she ordered, waving at the abandoned nav chair. “You look worse than I feel.”

Linda didn't deny it. She sat, her helmet in her lap, and wrapped her mind around what these two might need to know. “Ship's secured, sir. Solid feeds. Which means the station is powered up and airtight. Everyone's calm. Almost. The 'siders insisted on having people outside, on the hull.” She raised her eyebrow at Leland, making that a question.

“Old habit,” the stationer grunted. “After everyone grabs a bit of sleep, we'll crack the port seal. Hope you're game for that too, Earther.”

[li #]

Earther suits were designed so a child could use them, Dave reminded himself, tempted to take a swallow from the tube near his lips, stopped by the strangeness of drinking alone. A child. Children. He fastened on that, happier imagining an incredible future than the next few minutes, when he and Annette would walk out of the ship into the expanse of space.

Walk? He managed not to shudder. While in the shuttle's airlock, Dave and rest of the space-novices would have bags put over their helmets and be towed along with the rest of the gear to the station's emergency access port. 'Siders weren't inclined to avoidable risk.

Stationers weren't inclined to avoidable trust, either. Dave knew he wasn't the only one calculating the wisdom of putting his life into the hands of those who'd been forced to be virtually invisible during the blockade. 'Siders had survived because they were too stubborn to die, not because of station charity.

Of course, they had the Quill – and the Earthers -- to thank for all of that.

“Ready to check out the new place?” Annette's voice rang in his ears, brittle but determined. She nudged him from behind. “Remember. We want something in the inward levels -- a good location, with room for our repair shop. You know what Sammie told us – we need to establish an economy here, get things running so smooth there'll be no excuses for Earth to interfere.”

She wasn't being callous, Dave knew. It was better to think of Hamilton Station as empty, as space ready to occupy, than dwell on what might be waiting. “Ready as you are, darl'n,” Dave said as confidently as possible.

[li #]

Her hands wouldn't stop shaking. Linda left them alone in her lap, concentrating on the light, chest-only breaths she was taking, counting those.

“All that saved us was those codes,” Pavel said. She wasn't sure to whom or how often he'd repeated it. There were so many of them crowded together here, the blending of Earther and stationer made complete by the suits and the horror of their welcome, that Linda no longer tried to identify individuals.

“Sammie must have been here before,” a woman answered. “Surprised he remembered them. Sure glad he did.” This brought a laugh from some.

Linda swallowed bile. She'd seen what the stationers had not, virtue of being familiar with work in zero-G and to a horizon defined by a distant arc of sun-torched

white. Leland had been right. The ports had been traps. If they had tried to use the ship auto-dock system to attach themselves, the ports would have released their contents and destroyed them all. If they had tried to force entry? Same result. Destruction.

And if she'd stayed in Sol System, working a freighter, she'd never have had to see airlocks crammed tight with explosives and the dead to carry them.

Leland had been the unlikely hero. He'd gone first, ponderously graceful, disguised as handsome in his Earther suit, and had punched in codes for the emergency hatch as well as the larger cargo doors. Codes only those on Hamilton Station would know. Codes a Thromberg Station bartender shouldn't have known.

Why him? Why here?

They'd waited for Leland's signal, Earthers and 'siders securing their cabled-together bags of gear and helpless, blinded passengers. Credit to the stationers – none had panicked, none had vomited until safely inside the station, helmets off. That had been the greatest risk for those who could see, who had to clear the contents of at least one airlock immediately to get the helpless inside.

Linda wasn't sure if it been courage or disbelief that allowed her to keep going. She'd been humbly grateful to the 'siders who took what she passed outward with the presence of mind to tie everything together so nothing would float free and endanger the shuttle, only steps away.

So this was Hamilton Station. Linda couldn't have told where she was now from the docking ring on Thromberg, save for a different, fresher taste to the air – and the silence. She hadn't realized how noisy the throngs packing the other, living station had been, how comforting the background drone of thousands could be. Until she'd come here, where fifty-or-so huddled close, to make themselves feel like more.

Hamilton was messier. The stationers talked about this between themselves, uneasy. Linda remembered Thromberg as having a broken-in look – everything possible being used and reused. Nothing wasted. Hamilton? No one had *lived* here. She felt gorge rising again in her throat and forced it down. They'd existed, long enough for destruction and fear. Not long enough to fit pieces together and keep going.

Perhaps goaded by similar thoughts, the stationers began moving. Linda was startled when a hand pressed something into hers -- one of the metal strips. *Dibs*. She looked up and met the understanding eyes of the small, dark-haired woman she'd met in the shuttle, Annette Bijou. “Our turn, now,” Annette said. “There's work to do. You rest a while.”

Linda closed her fingers over the strip and stood, taking a deep breath. “What next?” she asked. Pavel slid upright beside her.

A keen look, then a nod. “Some are going to the 'vironment monitors, others to hydroponics. Dave and I are going to start checking the inward levels for working space and assess supplies. You're welcome to come with us.”

“Aren't you – aren't you --” Linda had trouble with the words.

“— looking for survivors?” Annette finished for her. “You don't understand what happened here, do you?”

“And you do?” Linda knew her voice was incredulous and overly loud, but none of the others took offense.

“They feared the Quill,” a deeper, more resonant voice answered. Leland and his shadow, Pettersen, were back from wherever they’d gone. The stationers clustered around to listen; Linda found the contact of strangers’ shoulders oddly comforting.

“Everyone feared the Quill,” Pavel protested. “Thromberg did – and you survived. You were the same --”

Pettersen shook his head, tight-lipped. As usual, it was Leland who spoke. “We survived because we didn’t close our ports, because we allowed ships to bring supplies and medicine.” The stationer paused, then put his hand on Pettersen’s thin shoulder. “We survived because people eventually took the chance those returning to us didn’t bring the Quill.”

Linda realized what she should have seen when on Hamilton’s hull. “No ‘siders. No ships at all.”

“Ships fled here,” Pettersen said at last. “Com logs say so. But Hamilton feared the Quill so much, station personnel laid mines to destroy any ship that approached. After that? Maybe they feared reprisals as well as the Quill, so more mines. Which meant no ships. No help. As they starved...as disease overwhelmed them...they put their dead on guard as well. Outside. In the ‘locks. Until the last of them sealed him or herself within.”

Leland sighed, deep and heavy. “We had our troubles, on Thromberg. Did things to regret.” A flash of pain crossed his face. “Unforgivable things. But we didn’t hide like this, we didn’t cut ourselves off from humanity.” His bulk shuddered, once, then he straightened. “Or stand around moaning about what’s done and gone,” this sharply. With that, the crowd began to dissolve, people picking up bags and gathering into small groups of four or five, heading in different directions.

Annette lingered. “How’d you know the codes, Sammie?” she asked quietly.

The stationer scowled, a ferocious distortion on that face, but Annette didn’t appear impressed. “How?” she repeated. “It saved us. Grateful for that. But people don’t want secrets at the start, Sammie. You know I’m right.”

“Come with me, then,” he growled, and walked away, heading for the nearest lifts.

Linda found herself alone with Pavel. “Are you returning to the shuttle?” she asked.

Pavel shook his head. “They’re going to start clearing the other ‘locks,” he said grimly. “I’d better get outside.” He hesitated, looking after Leland. “Go with him, Linda. The Captain will want to know what’s going on.”

[li #]

Dave knew the Earther woman followed them. Likely suspecting conspiracy or worse, he decided, noticing she kept a few steps back. Same old stuff. He tried, but couldn’t rouse anger. The reality of how fragile Thromberg’s peace had really been, how near to sharing

Hamilton’s fate they’d come – if they hadn’t found a way to live with the ‘siders, with each other, even with Earth? It wouldn’t have taken the Quill to kill them.

Sammie stopped without warning. Dave, right behind, had to lurch not to run into the other man’s back. He looked around hurriedly, as did the others, seeking danger, expecting ghosts.

And found one.

There was a sign, half-melted into the wall. The words on it were underlined by a ragged scorching. “Leland Interplanetary Travel Services Inc.” Below, in small, clear text: “Book a visit from that special someone today!”

They turned to him.

“My company,” Sammie acknowledged so softly it almost disguised the tremor in his voice. “I knew the entry codes because I started the franchise here, on Hamilton Station.”

“Franchise?” Annette asked, as if compelled. “There were more?”

He nodded. “Gave this one to my eldest boy, Henry, before moving to Thromberg. Henry was doing well -- brought his family. Wife, three little girls.” A pause. No one breathed. “I started a franchise on every station. I believed our future was out here, in space. This was my way of keeping us together.”

“All family?” Dave tried to comprehend the scale of such loss and failed. Sammie had aimed enough close kin at Thromberg’s sun to ice a heart. But this?

The heavy brows knotted. “Not all by blood. A cousin on Wye Station. An aunt on Pfefferlaws. Three nephews, on Hamble, Osari, Ricsus. The rest were – friends. People who followed my vision. Me.” Sammie’s eyes hadn’t left the sign.

The Earther, Linda, almost reached out her hand; the intention was written in a shift of posture, quickly contained. “People followed you today, Mr. Leland. Sammie. Because of you, we are still alive and have a future.”

Sammie didn’t respond, instead pushing aside the debris covering the door, stepping carelessly on rubble that didn’t bear examining too closely. A light started from his hand, played over a wide space, a countertop too solidly attached to move easily. He went behind, put both elbows on it, then leaned his head into his hands.

Dave ran his own light around the devastation, hoping not to find anything more identifiable than ripped plastic sheeting. He coughed in the dust. Beside him, Annette suddenly spoke: “Even your rotted beer would go good about now, Sammie.”

No one moved, as if the simple comment had been set loose to run over the room, checking size and shape, measuring for tables and plumbing, and they must do nothing but watch.

“It’s over.” A growl. A warning.

“It’s a great idea, Sammie,” Dave dared.

“Think so?” Sammie roared, lifting a face distorted with anguish and grief. “Mebbe I’m not innerested in any more ideas.”

Annette didn't back away. “You know what your place was for us on Thromberg. That's why you kept it open. Well, we need something like that here -- as much as we need coms and hydroponics – something to help make this our home.”

“Do you think the Earthers want us to have one?” Hard and bitter. “Do you really think they want anything to do with us, once we've cleared the bodies and done their dirty work?”

Dave felt himself gently pushed to one side as Linda stepped up to the counter. The Earther stared at Sammie a long moment, then slammed down her hand. When she lifted it again, there was a 'dib lying there, reflecting light.

“Yes,” was all she said.

[li #]

]Titan University Archives[

]Public Access[

]Reference: Post-Quill Era; Station Self-Government[

...Among the leading destinations for travelers of this era were the newly-independent stations, beginning with Thromberg and Hamilton. These cities in space not only hosted immigrants enroute to the new colonies and tourists eager to experience deep space, but also became thriving communities in their own right, attracting commerce through their advantages of location, a skilled and motivated labor force, and abundant energy resources. Governor Pavel Romanov, of Hamilton Station, is credited with being the first extra-Solar politician to obtain contracts limiting involvement in station internal affairs by the System Universities and TerraCor, agreements signed, legend insists, in a bar called Sammie's...

[THE END]