

ROBBERY
ON
ANTARES VI

RICHARD L. RUBIN

ROBBERY ON ANTARES VI

by Richard L. Rubin

“Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result.”

Winston Churchill

Cummi frowned as he sat in his banking outpost on Antares VI. He clutched his coffee cup as images of food riots and burning financial buildings on Alpha Centauri III streamed across his computer terminal. “Financial stocks are diving into a tailspin, reacting to negative developments throughout the galaxy,” reported the somber newscaster through Cummi’s tinny speaker. The news was negative, very negative. Just last month, a seismic quake had destroyed the research post on Ganymede and full-scale rebellion had broken out in the Procyon System. And, of course, there was the plague of ongoing pirate raids and shootouts throughout the Antares System. Cummi’s employer, the First Bank of Arcturus, had to really be feeling the pain of the ensuing financial turmoil.

The bright light from the twin stars poured in through Cummi’s office window. He loved the dual star system which lent its own mystic quality to the dry barren landscape of this frontier mining world. He’d hate to leave this place, but he was beginning to believe that his days as a bank clerk on Antares VI were numbered. Interplanetary deposits were down, transaction costs were rising, and it was becoming increasingly unprofitable for the First Bank of Arcturus to maintain its network of small banking branches, such as this one, on the remote mining colonies. Mining production on Antares VI had been tapering off for some time, although fresh ore was still being found here and there. A few solar years ago, reduced profits had prompted the bank to

streamline its corporate footprint on Antares VI. One consequence of the bank's cost-savings measures had been that Cummi's bank branch in the rough-and-tumble frontier town had been downsized. A larger, well-appointed bank building had been sold off to a brothel, Cummi's support staff had been fired, and he had been relocated to this one-clerk storefront, constructed of cheap scrap metals. In fact, Cummi's only remaining coworker in this tiny office was a robot security guard. However, the robot had blown a circuit last week and been shipped off to the repair shop, so Cummi sat in the office alone.

His thoughts were interrupted by a metallic click from the front door. A customer had entered the bank. Cummi looked up from his terminal and frowned as the fellow approached his desk. The man was tall and slightly built, dressed in well-weathered brown work pants, a red plaid flannel shirt, and dirty work boots. A wide-brimmed floppy brown hat, adorned with a purple band and several large red and white piranha-bird feathers, sat atop his head, looking comical when contrasted with the balance of his otherwise common workman attire. His eyes were a flinty gray, and a week's worth of unshaven coarse stubble covered the lower part of his sunburnt face. The man looked like a scruffy wildcat miner.

As the presumed miner made his approach, Cummi became painfully aware that the man hadn't bathed recently, probably not for several weeks. Still, a customer was a customer, and some of these miners had become quite wealthy as a result of a lucky ore strike. Cummi resolved to show him the same friendly service he would extend to a more refined customer.

"Greetings, sir. Have a seat."

The man nodded and casually dropped into the chair opposite Cummi's desk, leaving his hat on. Cummi flashed his most professional smile.

“What can the First Bank of Arcturus do for you this fine day?”

The man shifted uneasily, apparently considering something before he spoke. Cummi could understand. Many of these miners were out by themselves in the far country for months at a time without much human contact; it could take them a while to reacclimate themselves to being around people again.

Finally, the man seemed to resolve whatever was giving him pause. He reached into the deep pocket of his work pants and extracted a small metal black box with a glowing red button on top. The man placed his index finger lightly over the red button, but did not press down. He stared at Cummi and extended his hand, holding the device so that Cummi could get a clear look at it. Cummi shook his head in confusion.

“This is an atomic detonator. It’s rigged to a bomb I buried behind your bank last night,” the miner announced with gravity. “Hand over your money or I will blow your little bank here all the way to the Orion Nebula! There won’t be enough left of you here to fill a coffee cup!”

The man had a flare for the dramatic. Cummi sighed as he looked over the device which the man held out with a menacing smirk, as if he were proffering a poisonous Venusian vampire slug. This scruffy man was not a customer at all, he was a would-be bank robber -- and not even a very good one. The so-called “atomic detonator” looked exactly like a neutronic door opener of a kind commonly used in mining operations throughout the Antares System.

“That’s not an atomic detonator,” Cummi said, “It’s just a neutronic door opener.”

The man shook his head firmly and slammed his left fist on the desk. “This is an atomic detonator. If you don’t give me your money, I’ll blow you and this place up!”

“Even if what you’re saying is true and you could blow up the bank with that gadget, you’d die too in the explosion.”

“I don’t care! Captain Crossbones Jones, the space pirate, kicked me off his crew and left me broke and stranded here six months ago. I tried to stake out a mining claim over by the southern pole, but my vein went bust. I’m sick and tired of everybody calling me a loser! You’ll give me your money or we both die right here, right now!” A purple vein on the man’s neck bulged out and his eyes gleamed angrily.

Was this guy crazy? Cummi leaned back and weighed the situation. Bank policy said that in the event of any robbery attempt, the lives and safety of innocent customers should be protected for insurance purposes. But there were no customers in the bank now, only Cummi and the robber. At this hour most of the bank’s customers were far away, working their mines or searching for ore. Bank policy further stated that when the lives and safety of customers were not at issue and only bank employees were present, “reasonable measures” should be attempted to protect the bank’s assets.

Whatever he did, Cummi was on his own. His robot guard was in the shop. Sheriff Calkins, the town’s lone lawman, generally stopped by the bank once or twice a day to check on things and chew the fat, but Calkins had been bushwhacked last week while patrolling the badlands. He was laid up at Doc’s office where he was making a slow recovery.

Cummi’s inclination was to try to talk the man out of it. He had nothing to lose by such an attempt. Giving up the bank’s money would render Cummi’s branch even less profitable for the current quarter and more at risk of closure by the bank’s home office. On the other hand, if

he could finesse the situation, he might be able to keep his job. Heck, the bank might even give him a bonus.

Cummi smiled and threw out his opening gambit. “You look like you’re kind of down on your luck, mister. Want to tell me about it?”

The man looked puzzled and taken aback for a moment but quickly recovered his hard determination.

“I’m not here to make conversation. Give me your damn money!”

“I really can’t do that, but maybe I can help you in some other way. Why don’t you tell me how you got into this unfortunate situation?”

“Open the damn safe! Give me the money or I’ll blow you straight to hell!”

This was not working. Cummi would try another tack. “I know you’re just bluffing. You couldn’t possibly blow anything up with that thing.”

“This is a detonator! I’m a serious man!” The robber’s eyes looked angrier and crazier, and the purple neck vein bulged again. “If you don’t give me your money, I’ll blow you the hell up, and there won’t be enough left of you to fill a coffee cup!”

Cummi wasn’t going to be able to talk him out of this. And even if the detonator was a fake, as Cummi was almost certain, there was still the possibility that the man, like many denizens of this world, carried a needle gun, a laser, or some other weapon.

A glint of metal on his desk caught Cummi’s attention. It was his First Bank of Arcturus paperweight, embossed with the bank’s starry nebula logo. Solid brass. If the robber’s attention could be diverted for a moment, perhaps Cummi could seize the paperweight and smash it down

on the man's head. Cummi looked up quickly, hoping the man hadn't noticed him glancing at the object.

"Open the damn safe!" the man repeated, this time with more bite to his words, as he lunged closer. His eyes had grown wider, an even more crazed determination in his flinty gaze.

Cummi made eye contact with the man and nodded. "I'll get you your money," he said with what he hoped was a convincing tone of resignation.

"Now you're being smart."

Rising, Cummi went over to the massive black steel vault located at the back of the office and pressed his eye to the lens at the top of the vault door to allow it to automatically scan his retina. He recited the nine-digit combination, and the safe door swung out, revealing a series of shelves, some displaying sheaves of silvery credit wafers, others filled with raw ore. The man walked up behind him and, while gesturing with his free hand, called out what he wanted. Cummi picked up two large canvas bags from the floor of the vault and filled them with medium-denomination credit wafers, along with a handful of select ore nuggets, as the robber directed.

After Cummi had filled the bags, he turned around and, as the man backed away facing him, Cummi walked over to his desk to place the bags down. Cummi intended to grab the paperweight and brain this bastard when he leaned over to pick them up. But as Cummi put the bags on the desk, the man gave him a leering stare that chilled Cummi's blood. He knew! He knew! The man placed the black box in his pocket and took the bags, while Cummi stood frozen in place. He sighed. He'd lost his nerve, but at least this would all soon be over.

The man gave him a mischievous wink and, carrying away the heavy bags, backed towards the door. Cummi felt that he'd been had. The device couldn't be real, yet here he was letting this drifter leave with hundreds of thousands of galactic dollars of the bank's money – a painful sum which would most likely result in Cummi losing his job. He had to know if it was all a bluff.

Cummi called out as the thief reached for the door. “Wait. You're at the door, and I promise to let you be on your way in any event. But I've got to know. That's really just a neutronic door opener, isn't it?”

The man turned and gave Cummi a long flinty stare. After what seemed like a full minute, the robber broke into a broad and maniacal grin. He dropped the bags, pulled the device out of his pocket and held it up. Winking at Cummi, he slowly pressed the button down.

Nothing happened.

“Sucker!” the man called out with a smirk as he bent over to pick up his bags of loot.

Cummi sprang to his desk, grabbed the paperweight, and hurled it at his tormentor with unrestrained fury. The solid brass First Bank of Arcturus starry nebula logo paperweight struck the robber full in the head. The man's floppy brown hat flew off, and he crumpled to the floor like a lifeless doll.

Cummi ran over to where the man lay and stood over the tangled body. The robber was unconscious, with a deep, ugly gash on his forehead. Cummi quickly crossed over to the back of the bank to a footlocker where the robot security guard's supplies were kept. Cummi unlocked the box using the lock's retina scan. Rummaging through the contents, he quickly found what he was looking for: a compact, but deadly, needle gun. Cummi returned to where the robber lay.

The man's breathing was shallow and heavily labored. He didn't look like he was going to make it, but there was no point in taking chances. Cummi pressed the needle gun against the man's right temple and pulled the trigger.

Then Cummi slipped the gun in his trouser pocket. He slung the bags of money over his shoulders. Cummi went out into the dry desert world outside, and began walking in the direction of the transport tube that would take him to Antares Space Port. With his newfound wealth he could buy a powerful ship, hire himself a buccaneer crew, become a player in the System.

Times had changed.

THE END