

## Stealing the Rose

by John Cook (as Ian Stewart)

I zipped up my Captain's tunic as I walked briskly around the corner and nearly ran into an imposing figure with a granite jaw and expressionless grey eyes.

Seeing that I was trying play it cool, I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Well, if it isn't the new Security guy," I said cheerfully, and then smiled to show that I meant nothing by it. My cheesy grin bounced off his stony silence and evaporated, and I knew in that moment that we were in Big Trouble. The waves of displeasure radiating away from him were strangely palpable.

He'd obviously heard this one before. He spoke in a deep, flinty voice. "I'm not a Security 'guy,' I am Dock Officer Qarl Tammeson, and today I'm keeping the dock area in order." He looked me in the eye. "What are you doing?" And then, after measuring me quickly up and down, he grudgingly added "...Sir."

*Security guards have no sense of humor,* I observed to the voice in my head.

Shari responded in kind. *I wouldn't let him hear you call him a 'guard' if I were you. Officers aren't especially known for their levity on-duty. 'Tammeson,' he said?*

I nodded as if in agreement, sending a different message to each of them. The strange thing was that I had the distinct impression that he wasn't buying it for a minute, and told myself that I was imagining things.

In classical paintings, the 'nimbus' was a radiant light that appeared as a halo over the head of a saint or sacred person. In modern military equipment parlance, the Nimbus was a Black Ops thought communication tool that had only been successfully tested between members of the opposite gender, and was exclusively issued to lovers because of the intense connection between people.

The size of a grain of rice, the Nimbus was injected under the skin and started transmitting as soon as it reached body temperature, which is to say, almost immediately.

In practical use, the Nimbus made for some interesting exchanges. For instance, it's hard to describe the sensation of a whistle in your head, such as the one I was 'hearing.'

*Humorless is right*, she said, *especially if you're former Special Forces, and that's just what's on the record. There's a four year gap here that suggests something even more secretive. You might want to give this one a wide berth*, she said.

*I got that last part by myself, thanks*, I thought wryly, but it didn't really translate, thus reinforcing the old adage—there's no laughter in space.

"I'm preparing to head out. We'll be out of here shortly," I said, and then realized that I'd said 'we.'

It was his turn to nod. "Which is your ship?"

*"The Summer Rose of Amistastia. We call her the Rose for short, and she's the best ship this side of the galactic tail."* It was the sort of thing a fly-boy Captain might say, just the right touch of breezy arrogance.

More to the point, it was not the sort of thing a thief would say.

**Retired thief**, she thought at me, and I thought of how we acquired the thought-tech, and smiled despite myself.

He looked at me expressionlessly, and then consulted his sleeve. "The *Rose* is helmed by M. T. Anson," he said, and looked at the 'Anson' emblazed on the uniform I'd taken from the man now stashed in the closet around the corner. "Captain Anson?" he said, and it was a statement more than a question, almost as if we both knew it wasn't true.

I smiled and bowed, perhaps deeper than I should have, but he had this coming.

I may have been acting the part of Anson, but my role as the Captain was genuine, if not, strictly speaking, 'legitimate.'

**Now, please**, I thought. *You can just make it if you hurry.* She didn't respond, which either meant that she was on her way, or already captured. I was hoping for the former. We were risking enough as it was. Which reminded me...

I wagged one lazy index finger in his direction. "You're just the man I wanted to see, Officer. I have it on good authority that an attempt will be made today to steal the *Rose*."

He stared at me. I'd have loved to know what was going on behind those calculating eyes. He spoke slowly, almost coyly, in the fashion of law enforcement types everywhere, allowing one just enough rope to hang themselves. "I haven't heard anything. How reliable is this tip?"

I looked at him with all earnestness and said, "Ours is very expensive information, and I'm quite sure it is correct—someone will try to steal this ship within the next twelve hours, and I intend to make sure we lift off without incident."

All that was true enough, but not remotely the way I made it sound.

At that moment, a lithe young woman rounded the corner on the run. I said, "Excuse me," to Tammeson and backhanded her as she passed me, lifting her up off her feet and slamming her against the cold steel corridor wall.

I turned back to speak to him but a rowdy buzz had started and my words caught in my throat as I heard her crumple to the floor.

An activated sonic baton emits a signature sound and leaves an indelible memory. On the one hand, I was very pleased that he didn't nail me with his baton then and there. On the other, the active baton was pointed right at me.

"Put that away," I snapped. "She's my vassal."

He met my eyes and any rapport we'd developed before, however sketchy, was long gone. He glared at me for a good, long moment and then deactivated his baton.

I realized I'd been holding my breath. I tried not to make a big deal about that and strode forward to stand over the woman.

"You're late," I snapped. "You were told to prepare for lift-off. This will cost me money, and it will cost you, later tonight!"

She whimpered and averted her eyes, a dribble of blood leaking down from the right side of her lip.

"On your feet!" I barked, hiding behind my bravado.

She shot a pleading look at Tammeson, but if my imagination was to be trusted, his gaze was squarely on me and his furious stare could have drilled holes in the back of my head.

I heard an explosive sound and I didn't quite jump, but it was just Tammeson reholstering his baton. It was the first sign of overt emotion from him, and I figured that was a Very Bad Thing.

I'd underestimated him, however. "I'll return shortly," he said in a steely clipped tone, and abruptly stalked off down the corridor, the de-activated baton thwapping against his leg as he walked. He turned a corner and his footsteps echoed off down the corridor.

I rushed to her and dropped down on one knee. I tenderly took her hand and helped her up. "Poured it on a bit thick, don't you think?" I said brushing her hair back from her face, anxiously searching her face. "Are you hurt?" My voice was full of jovial bluster to cover the anxiety parked like a brick in the back of my throat.

My gal is decisive; I'll give her that. She kissed me firmly to put my fears to rest; however, it was real blood that I tasted on my tongue. I guessed it was from hitting the wall, because I'd barely touched her.

She was way ahead of me, as usual. Her eyes sparkled and her voice was playful when she replied. "It takes more than a pulled slap and a staged body slam to get the better of me."

I smiled, hoping I was convincing. She was no better a liar than I was, especially in Nimbus-link. Shari thought all this was quite fun, while I was feeling like I'd just invited the eternal enmity of one who could make life very difficult for both of us, for all of us. I very badly wanted to never see him again.

At least one of us was having a good time.

Shari saw me thinking and grinned impishly. It was strange how she knew my mind so well even when we weren't physically together, but that's one characteristic of the Nimbus—actual proximity had nothing on the intimacy of the mind link.

Something shimmered in my vision. "*It's not a **danger**,*" the Training Officer had said to her, "*it's a **feature**.*"

I shook my head to shake off the osmosis-memory. It was strange 'remembering' memories that belonged to someone else. I wondered which of my past memories haunted her, and decided that I didn't want to know.

"If you'll get the rest of the supplies loaded on board, I'll arrange the launch codes with the Dock Authority," I said. "With any luck, we'll be underway before Mr. Dock Officer Security Guy Tammeson shows up again."

She grinned. "The sooner we're gone, the better," she said.

"This was supposed to be the easy part!" I replied.

She nodded, winked, and strode back toward the ship, working it just a little, knowing the effect she had on me. In Nimbus-link, there's nothing to hide when nothing is hidden. I could spend the rest of my life watching her walk around with the beguiling swagger of a free woman.

I had actually turned away when I sensed alarm. I whirled and saw her jump back from a box and stare. I was already running when I saw the stranger appear to her right. I was yelling when I saw him step forward and strike her, driving her back.

The blow knocked me out of my sprint in sympathetic response. As I struggled to keep my feet, I saw/felt Shari trip backwards over a crate, fall hard to the cold steel floor, and was still, and I felt her pain as I staggered toward her.

I was so focused on her that by the time I sensed something to my right and skidded to a stop, it was too late. I felt the cold industrial plastic muzzle of a blaster roughly scrape my temple.

"No sudden moves, you," said a voice unknown to me. "Hands behind your neck!"

"What's going on?" I grated, slowly complying.

"We're stealing your ship, Captain," he said, and I had just enough time to stop and appreciate the irony before something kicked like a mule and my day turned into night.

#

Slavers. The very word made my stomach roil.

When humankind finally leapt into space for parts unknown, there was a great optimism about what we could do, about the potential to reap vast personal fortunes from fast, cheap space travel and uncharted planets. We had the technology, we had the resources, we had the motivation—it looked like a new Golden Age.

But as fast as computers became, reliable metal laborers were still far more expensive than the human variety, and it soon became clear that any prosperous venture would require some degree of sheer grunt labor, and lots of it until we could build and ship appropriate machinery to help do the heavy lifting.

The good news is that there were billions of such willing to take the gamble on space life, and corporations willing to ship them there. The bad news is that the corporations got richer if they didn't pay them. Those who controlled the space liners and the comm-sats and channels carefully regulated all communications back home, and no one was the wiser. The Golden Age was a cruel façade covering the greatest across-the-board destruction of human rights in history.

People became the new cash crop, and pirate outfits sprang into business stealing ships, kidnapping people, and hiring them off as brute laborers doing the massive and menial work of creating the new colonies, building the new space stations, settling the new planets.

This ship must have seemed like a prime target. The *Rose* already contained ten thousand sleeping citizens from all walks of life, waiting for the moment of their awakening in a galaxy of great promise, not knowing that some hundreds of them had already been awakened and pressed into service as slave labor in preparation for shipment to yet another new colony.

It was chillingly simple, and the men that held us up had the same idea as others before them.

I muttered an unmentionable word under my breath, feeling my arms tied behind my back.

He had a pinched, rodent-like face and a weird accent. "Now-now, Captain, you're hardly one to sit in judgment. We know that you're in the same boat as we are, making money off a 'captive audience'." He snickered, plainly mimicking somebody else's cleverness. "This time, you're going to ride in back with the rest instead of up front with us."

"Wouldn't be the first time," I said evenly, my heart sinking. I fought to keep the despair from my face.

He came forward and got in my face. "That there is what you call 'irony'," he said.

*You have **no** idea*, I thought.

*Ugh*, she sent, and I could almost taste the blood from the left side of her mouth.

My heart surged when I realized she was conscious. I also felt the strange urge to pee.

*Stay down*, I sent, but I knew that was pointless, a symbolic gesture at best. I knew my girl.

My captor grabbed my jaw and roughly examined both sides of my face. Then, over his shoulder, “This one’s a bit banged up but otherwise salable. Check on the woman.”

I heard footsteps, then “Hey, she’s OOF—” and I felt the ghost impact with my foot and travel up my leg. It wasn’t hard to know what she’d done. *Thanks, Shari, but please find someplace to hide—you’ve just become a target.*

It’s bad enough to feel helpless by myself. Now I was feeling helpless from both of us. I had to do something.

I sprang to my feet, or started to, but the ties around my ankles tripped me before I got going and the ties around my wrists behind my back kept me from putting my arms out. As a result, I lurched up and pitched forward, and then I caught the deck with my face.

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The words corresponded to the pounding in my head, *Jack. Jack! JACK!* The thought was somehow so oppressive that I couldn’t catch my breath, couldn’t breathe.

*Your pain! I can’t...*

Oh, yeah, I had to be broadcasting my pain all over the place. I didn’t blame her for cutting the connection, even while knowing what it cost her to do so. The Nimbus is no respecter of niceties.

Clearly, saving her myself wasn’t going to work. I was going to have to do something else. But what else could I do?

However, even while I should have been thinking about alternatives, something else was niggling around the edge of my awareness, and then I had it.

Despite the pain in my face and the blood in my mouth, something else was wrong. I could detect a Nimbus connection even though she’d turned hers off. So that was the question; if she had deactivated her Nimbus, who was it that was walking up the hallway? And as a follow-up question, who else around here had an active Nimbus connection that I could possibly hone in on?

My eyes flickered open and I set the mystery of the Nimbus aside for the moment and concentrated on more pressing issues, like how to breathe with Rat-face's bony knee digging painfully into my chest.

"Where'd she go?" he yelled over the din of the conveyor belts that were somehow running. I'd missed then being activated, somehow. "There's six of us and two of you, and your time is running out. Tell me what I want to know right now."

I looked him in his beady little eye and got the message; tell him what I knew or I'd never draw a full breath again.

It wasn't so much a thought as a realization; the entire left side of my face hurt, my nose was aggrieved, there was blood in my mouth, my lungs were already starting to tingle, and my chest hurt where he leaned on it with his knee.

Despite all that, I realized that I'd rather die than sell her out, and rested content with that determination.

Especially since I had no idea where she'd slipped off to.

My vision was starting to go and my thoughts got all mixed up and fuguey, like when I'm just starting to slip into a dream-state when I'm not fully awake, not fully asleep.

And *that's* when the collection of niggling clues rolling around in the back of my head came together and I finally realized that I knew what it was: Black ops, his own Nimbus, watching me instead of her, waves of displeasure, not being fooled...

Oh my deity, how could I have been so blind?

My eyes left Rat-face and I looked past him although I knew the answer even before I saw Tammeson come into my field of vision.

It occurred to me that he was onto me, and now I was onto him, but he wasn't onto me being onto him. It also occurred to me that I was beyond lightheaded by this point.

I'd never heard of successful Nimbus connections within gender, much less between total strangers, and yet...

I tried to focus my eyes and looked past Rat-face's knee, and there he was, quietly taking it all in.

Dock Officer Tammeson was squatting behind a crate and he was looking right at me with a clinical dispassion, apparently none the worse for the mental wear.

He nodded, once. My hunch was correct. Now what?

*Six*, I thought. He continued to look at me, waiting. So much for that. I closed my eyes. They were closing anyway. *Six!* I thought. *SIX!*

His eyes snapped wide open and his fingers shot out, five on the left hand, the index on the right. I sensed this through Nimbus feedback instead of seeing it.

He nodded once and rose to his feet. He loosed his baton from his hip, slipped the loop over his right hand, and spun it briefly with his left hand to take up some of the slack. Then he walked into the room and stepped into the light. He radiated calm, which, under the circumstance, was the polar opposite of 'safety.'

He tapped Rat-face lightly on the shoulder with the sonic baton. My persecutor twisted around to look and got a full dose of noise upside his head. It snapped his head around and he crumpled back and fell in a heap behind me, his energy weapon falling toward the deck. Rolling forward with a dexterity known to wall-ball players, Tammeson snapped the pistol out of thin air and then bounced nimbly to the balls of his feet.

I took a great rasping breath and my eyes snapped open.

Tammeson did that twice more, walking up to a slaver, tapping them on the shoulder, and then putting them down with his baton.

That left three more.

I'd gotten my breath back enough to sit up. Officer Tammeson returned to me long enough to loose my wrists and ankles. I was grateful for that, but he wasn't done.

Looking down at me, he deactivated his baton and extended his left hand and pulled me to my feet, pressing a pistol into my hand. I noted that it was set to a stun setting.

He split his fingers into a V and pointed at his eyes. *Watch me*. Yeah, I got that. He didn't seem surprised.

He took the one on the left, and I took the one on the right. I waited until Tammeson started his swing and then took my guy with a snap shot to the back

of the neck. However, as our two went down, the final one got away. I started to go after him but Tammeson waved me off and let him run. "He's not going anywhere," he said, and I believed him.

Five minutes later, the *Rose* was back under our control, and Shari joined us from over by the conveyor belt that she'd started while I was out, and we arrived at the moment I'd been secretly dreading.

I hoped to Sanctuary that I wasn't broadcasting that all over the dock.

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He said "Well, 'Captain Anson,' we've successfully avoided one theft..."

"Well done, Officer," I said, and then carefully raised my hands as he turned and trained his weapon on us. He came over to retrieve his stunner and I saw him look at my wrist as he took it out of my hand, and I hoped my sleeve was covering the tattoo.

"Therefore," he said, "that just leaves the original plot to deal with."

I looked at Shari and wondered if she was able to read my mind without using the Nimbus. Her crestfallen expression was clear enough without it.

"The *real* Captain Anson is actually the man who brought me here," Tammeson said, "...but there's no way you could have known that. Nor could you have known that the Security Officers have their schedules switched at random to avoid little payoffs like this one. My predecessor will be removed, of course. I suspect he'll be allowed to keep his thirty pieces of silver but will be sent packing on the next ship out of here.

"Which brings me to you two. Yes, I was eavesdropping on your Nimbus," he said, and that gave me the opening I'd been looking for.

"We know you're ex-Floda Squad," I said, "but that's not all, is it? There's more that's not on the record." He looked at me without replying. I took that to as a 'yes.' I continued.

"I'm betting that the Military had the Nimbus developers put in some kind of 'back-door' functionality that nobody else knows about it."

He smiled for the first time, but it was a fleeting thing. He changed the subject.

"You said you knew there was going to be an attempt to steal the *Rose* today, but you weren't counting on there being two groups vying for the same vessel

at the same time. I'll give you this much—you were right about an attempt on the ship. Taking your statement at face value, after leaving you earlier, I went and found their ship and impounded it—it's not going anywhere."

That made sense to me. It explained where he'd gone earlier, and why Tammeson didn't chase the one remaining slaver just now—there was nowhere left to run. The remaining slaver was trapped here just as thoroughly as the sleepers he sought to enslave.

Tammeson continued. "What you didn't tell me was that you were the group who were going to steal the *Rose*, and why. That's why I came back, to put things in order."

The way he said that sent shivers down my spine. Shari held me tight and looked up at me with brimming eyes, but didn't send to me. "Good girl," I thought to myself. I would miss her.

I was thinking along these lines when he spoke again, and I almost missed it. "In my line of work, I know what the tattoo on one's wrist means, the brand of an enslaved person."

I said nothing. He continued. "You know, I wasn't planning on leaving the kind of 'work' I was doing, but I received word from Terra that my youngest brother was coming to see me on his way to Florimel Five, and I discovered that I was looking forward to seeing him on his way through."

He looked at me with those deep, expressionless eyes. "I received word later that his ship had been stolen in transit. It's likely that instead of the freedom of the colonies, he's discovered the slavery of the very corporations that ultimately paid my wage."

I blinked. This wasn't going the way I'd feared. I discovered that I was starting to hope again.

Tammeson continued. "I resigned and spent four years tracking down lead after lead until all my leads and all my savings dried up. I had to find someplace central, so I came here as a last resort and took a job for an arguably shady employer where I stood the best chance of uncovering certain jobs. Like this one."

That made sense to me. This was a remote but crucial way station to the stars, and he was perfectly positioned to get news of his brother if such were remotely possible. I knew, as he did, that it was the longest of long shots.

I also knew the lengths that desperate people would go to win freedom for themselves or those they loved.

Tammeson turned away from me, thinking. “The real Captain Anson earned a reputation as a cruel opportunist. Perhaps his reputation will fare better after today,” he said. Then, turning and measuring me with his eyes, he nodded his head to himself and abruptly said, “Well, I’m going to go see to the escaped slaver.” He looked me square in the eye. “I expect that you’ll be here when I return.” Then he spun on his heel and strode off, his military boots click-clicking down the cold steel hall.

It took me a moment to realize what he had said, and more to the point, what he hadn’t. I slowly dropped my arms, took Shari’s hand, and started running to the *Rose*.

That’s when we heard it. It’s hard to describe the sensation of a whistle in your head, but we both sensed it at the same time, and smiled.

Somewhere, Dock Officer Tammeson was whistling.

## Ian Stewart

*Ian Stewart claims to be a missionary on furlough from Mongolia, with a life-long love of space opera. Husband of one, father of two, friend to many, Ian is truly a man of imagination. This is the first story to bear his name.*

### **Author’s note:**

I guess you can say that this fictional account is based on a true story.

I was working at an insurance company as a tech writer in 2006. We had had a series of break-ins, one of which resulted in the loss of a number of laptop computers. The environment seemed ripe for protection, and the company sprang for 24/7 security protection shortly thereafter.

I walked out of a meeting one day and saw our new security guard standing behind the front desk. Thinking to make him feel at home, I blurted out the exact same phrase as is recorded in the beginning of this story. That first meeting did not go well, and my fellow writers joked that I would be the recipient of much undesired from the security force from that moment on. However, I have a strange sense of humor, and I was so taken with the incident that I went home and wrote the bulk of this story in two nights after work on my new PowerBook in the backyard based on that first encounter. As you can see, I had all the faith in the world in the character of that security guard. I was right in more ways than one.

I saw him in the hall at work the following week and stopped. I started to apologize for my comment, but he apologized for his reaction instead, and I like to think that a friendship was born. His name is Ed Matteson, and he was an honorably discharged veteran of the first Iraq war with special forces experience. I was pleased to see that my brief encounter sized him up as a good guy, and also somebody not to trifle with. Ed, this story is for you. I’d like to think there are sequels out there somewhere just waiting to see the light of day.

I submitted this story to RGR under an anonymous pseudonym when we had our first slushpile shortage, and it helped tide us over until we got more stories in for the following issue.