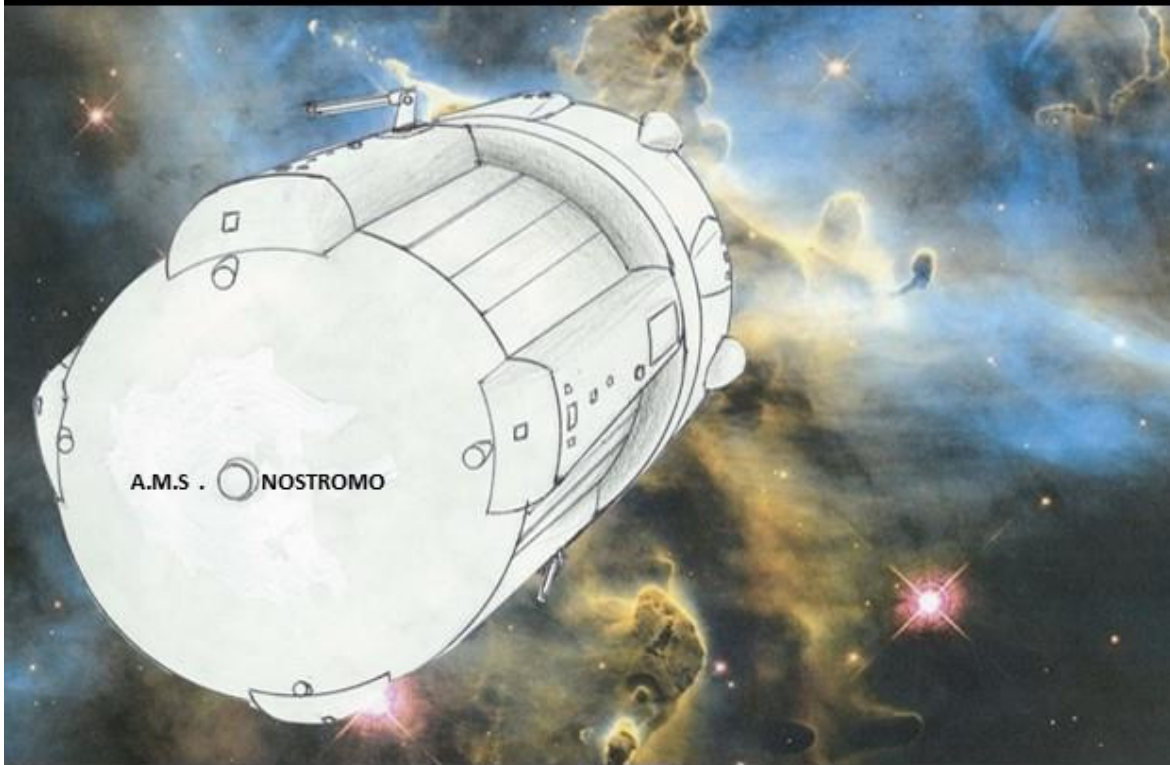


NOSTROMO ON THE PROWL



A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

By

MICHEL POULIN

NOSTROMO

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS WHICH ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to my A NEW ERA and is the eight novel in the Kostroma Series. It is continuing the adventures in Space of Captain Tina Forster and of her mighty cargo ship NOSTROMO and her crew. The year is 2335 and the NOSTROMO, damaged in a major battle during which it victoriously fought and destroyed a powerful fleet of Space Predator asteroid ships and thus saved the inhabitants of the planet Nordland, is returning to the Solar System for some urgent repairs. Despite her victory, Captain Tina Forster can't celebrate yet, as she just learned that, while Humanity doesn't know where the surviving Space Predator worlds are, the monsters now know where to find the planets occupied by Humanity.

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CHAPTER 1 – URGENT REPAIRS



The Avalon Space Yards, Low Earth Orbit.

19:38 (Universal Time)

Monday, November 4, 2335

Avalon Space Yards, Low Earth Orbit

Solar System

Gustav Shomberg, owner, chief-designer and manager of the Avalon Space yards, watched from inside an observation gallery as the huge Class 'A' super-heavy cargo ship slowly entered Drydock Number One, the largest drydock of the Avalon Space Yards and also the largest in existence in Humanity's Space. The 3,000 meter-long and 1,800 meter-diameter A.M.S. NOSTROMO actually nearly filled the huge volume of Drydock Number One as it slowly flew inside it. Shomberg's attention

immediately focused on the multiple long, dark furrows scarring the bow shield and flanks of the NOSTROMO.

“Damn! The damage is more extensive than I was afraid about. Thankfully, Captain Tina Forster seemed to have succeeded in minimizing that damage from Space Predator laser beams by rotating her ship along its longitudinal axis while fighting those Space Predator ships. Look at how those furrows burned in by laser beams have a spiraling shape.”

His assistant chief-engineer, Karina Martens, who was standing next to Shomberg, nodded her head then.

“I believe that we will have to completely replace the bow shield of the NOSTROMO: those furrows are very deep ones and a few of them intersect together, seriously weakening the structural integrity of the whole bow shield. One of the lateral sliding cargo doors will also have to be replaced: it was apparently penetrated completely by a laser beam strike. Hopefully, the damage inside that hold will be minimal. The main problem we will have here is that the NOSTROMO is a one-of-a-kind ship: there are no existing structural spare parts for its bow and cargo doors. They will thus have to be built to specifications from scratch. That alone will add a good two to three months to the repair time.”

“I am afraid that you are right about that, Karina. However, I am also afraid that Captain Forster will take that piece of news pretty badly. The Spacers League wants and needs her ship to return into service as quickly as possible, in order for it to help defend our colonies from those monstrous Space Predators. Over half a million people are said to have perished in that Predator attack and invasion of the planet Nordland, in the TOI 700 System, and the other one and a half million inhabitants are still alive only because of the heroic actions of the NOSTROMO and of its crew.”

Martens, a tall Eurasian woman of mixed Dutch-Indonesian heritage, nodded her head again.

“Maybe, but I can’t see the NOSTROMO return into combat without first being properly repaired. Any rush to effect only partial repairs will only make it vulnerable to enemy fire. Such a valorous ship and crew deserves our best efforts at returning it to full operational capabilities, Gustav. In my opinion, we are looking at a minimum of three to four months of repair work, including the building of a new shield and cargo door. Did the Spacers League’s Admiralty confirm that it would cover the full costs of the repairs?”

"They did! Frankly, to not fully cover those costs would have been downright miserly: by defeating the Space Predators' invasion fleet by itself and by sending down its force of security androids to help rescue the inhabitants of Nordland, the NOSTROMO has proved itself to be essential to the defense of Humanity. We will work 24 hours a day, seven days a week on those repairs, using four full work crews in rotation to do the job. By the way, the Admiralty has authorized us to use the latest type of prismatic quartz shield material to rebuild the NOSTROMO's bow shield. It may be much more costly than the standard ceramic shield material we use but it also has the best resistance to laser fire among all the types of materials available."

"Then, I will order at once the production of new shield elements made of prismatic quartz for the new shield of the NOSTROMO. Should we also replace the hull ablative plating of the ship with prismatic quartz blocks?"

Shomberg, a tall and strongly-built man of Scandinavian descent who was now in his early sixties, only had to think about that for a second before answering Martens.

"Do it, Karina! It may add substantially to the cost of the repair work but I believe that the NOSTROMO, as the main asset of Humanity's combat fleet, deserves it. In fact, not giving it our best would be derelict on our part."

"One last question for you, Gustav: what color of prismatic quartz blocs shall we use? Five choices of basic colors of prismatic quartz blocs exist which we can use depending on the laser frequency the enemy uses, ranging from blue to black. I am asking because I see that Captain Forster had her ship painted over with matte black radar-absorbing paint. On the other hand, it would be wise to use the type of quartz color most efficient in absorbing and dispersing the laser beam frequencies used by the Space Predators."

"A good point, Karina. I will let Captain Forster decide on that when we will meet her."

"I must say that I can't wait to finally meet her: she is such a legend throughout the Spacers League."

"And rightly so, Karina. She first defeated nearly single-handedly the forces of the Earth Federation with her KOSTROMA during the Jovian Uprising of 2315, found that Koorivar ship on Eris in 2317, then defeated the Drazts of Ross 128 in 2320 after they attacked her ship without provocation, to succeed afterwards in convincing them to sign a peace treaty with us and to become our allies. Now, the NOSTROMO has proven to be the main shield of Humanity against those monstrous Space Predators."

"Don't forget the role her security androids, produced by us at her request and according to her design, in fighting those Space Predators. They have proven to date to be by far the best Space infantry force we have. Maybe the Spacers League should ask us to relaunch their production here."

Gustav Shomberg sighed on hearing that remark.

"They really should, but they won't, for two reasons: first, there is still way too much anti-android racist sentiments and attitudes around the Spacers League to make that a viable political decision; second, Tina Forster will refuse that any sentient security android be used by others than herself, not because she wants to keep a monopoly on their use but because she is rightly afraid that others will use those sentient security androids as simple cannon fodder and will treat them basically like slaves. Unfortunately, the past six and a half years only proved that her fears about that were well founded."

"Then, how about we support her security android force our own way, Gustav?" Shomberg looked at his assistant chief-engineer with some confusion.

"What do you mean by that, Karina?"

"Well, I know that this would be your money involved but the production line for her androids is still functional in our robotics department, although it is presently dormant. While deactivated at Captain Forster's request, it still could be restarted rather quickly. On the other hand, even while asking the Admiralty a fair price for repairing the NOSTROMO, we will still end up with a profit on that contract easily exceeding one billion credits. Shouldn't we contribute our own part in this war effort against the Space Predators by offering to produce a new batch of security androids at no cost for Captain Forster?"

Karina was pleased to see Gustav smile at her suggestion.

"You know what, Karina? I like your idea. I will offer it to Tina when we will meet with her this evening before starting our detailed inspection of her ship's damage. Can you remind me of the updated cost for building each of those security androids?"

"Each of them costs about 85,000 credits to produce. Even if we spend only ten million credits of our profit on her androids, it would still mean for her an additional one hundred androids for her security force, plus a number of new android diagnostic stations and spare parts, something which would still be a significant addition to her force."

Those numbers made Gustav think for a few seconds before nodding his head.

“Very well! I will present our proposal once we meet her.”

The two of them kept looking at the NOSTROMO until the giant armed merchant ship was fully stopped and secured into the extendable cradle arms and moorings of the drydock. The duo then used an electric cart to roll to the nearest access point of the drydock, to which a retractable access tunnel from the NOSTROMO had just mated with. Once that access tunnel had been fully pressurized, Gustav drove his cart into it after gaining permission from the ship’s security command post to roll in. They ended up driving for a good 1,500 meters along the western access tunnel of the NOSTROMO, passing through a succession of nine widely-spaced and heavily armored airlock doors before they parked their cart near one of the entrances of the central longitudinal core spine of the ship. Even that entrance proved to be protected by an airlock. Looking around her as they cycled through that final airlock, Karina’s expert eyes noticed the four small optical camera turrets attached to each of the four ceiling corners of the airlock. Each of those camera turrets also sported what looked to her like a short weapon barrel.

“My god! The internal security arrangements on this ship seem to be nearly impregnable. Are these disintegrator rifles, Gustav?”

“Actually, they are the barrels of light disintegrator pistols: anything more powerful would cause severe damage to this airlock if fired inside it. The small hole next to it is the muzzle of a cryogenic nitrogen gas projector, meant to freeze and immobilize but not kill attackers, while that small lens is the business end of a neural stun gun. If those don’t prove enough or adequate to deter boarders, the artificial gravity system inside this airlock can be set on so-called ‘ping-pong’ mode, to make its occupants bounce repeatedly between the floor and the ceiling, and that until they had enough of it. That ping-pong mode can be set between one and ten in power scale. You wouldn’t want to experience anything higher than three in power scale, while a ten-power scale would most probably kill you. The central artificial intelligence computer of the NOSTROMO, Spirit, can remotely control all these weapons and airlock doors and can defend the ship from boarders by itself.”

Karina couldn’t help shiver nervously on hearing his explanation.

“By the stars! I wouldn’t want to see that Spirit break down into some paranoia state: we would be toast!”

Just as she finished saying that, a loud, sadistic laughter echoed inside the airlock, while both doors closed tight in a flash.

"MOUAHAHAHAH! YOU ARE NOW MINE!"

"Who was that?" nearly shouted Karina, feeling panic rising in her. In response, a still calm and composed Gustav Shomberg simply grinned to her.

"That was Spirit. Did I tell you that she has a sense of humor?"

"She...she does?"

"Of course I do, Miss Martens. Sorry about scaring you like this but I couldn't resist this occasion. Captain Forster is waiting for you in the bridge conference room, along with her second-in-command and her chief-engineer. You may now proceed up to the bridge conference room, on Level 490."

"Uh, thanks!"

Moving with Gustav, Karina walked into a 36-meter-wide rotunda at the center of which stood a sixteen-meter-diameter vertical column containing a number of elevator lift tubes. Walking inside one of the elevator cabins, which was presently on their level, Karina looked suspiciously around the inside of the cabin, looking for more weapons turrets.

"At least, there are no weapons turrets in this lift cabin, Gustav."

"Correct, but it is still equipped with a ping-pong device. If you were an armed boarder, Spirit could stop this cabin between two decks, then play with you until you cry 'uncle'. And these are only the internal defenses of this ship. You wouldn't want to try attacking it with another ship: it would most probably spell your doom."

"And this is supposed to be a cargo ship, Gustav? You were definitely devious as hell when you designed it for Captain Forster."

"I didn't design it, Karina: Spirit designed it, following the directives from Tina Forster. Even by then, Tina had already proven herself to be the best Space tactician and ship handler around."

"Wait! How could this Spirit have designed the NOSTROMO, when she is part of the ship?"

"How? Because Spirit was first built as part of the KOSTROMA, the illustrious predecessor of the NOSTROMO, some 46 years ago. When the KOSTROMA was destroyed some seven years ago by performing a suicide charge which destroyed the Space Predator ship ravaging Kadosh, the homeworld of the Drazts of Ross 128, Spirit's daughter, Eve Silisca, was able to save copies of Spirit's personality and personal memories. These copies were eventually transferred and downloaded into the armored

central computer vault of the NOSTROMO. You must know that Eve Silisca is the first sentient android designed and produced by Spirit in the robotics workshops of the KOSTROMA. As such, she is of an even more advanced design than that of the security androids built for Captain Forster.”

“I do remember meeting her a number of times on our space yard, when she was directing the building of those security androids. If not for having been told in advance about her, I would never have guessed that she was not a human being. She also proved then to be extremely intelligent and perceptive, with highly developed social skills.”

“She is also a strikingly beautiful-looking young woman.” said Gustav, liking his lips, making Karina look crossly at him.

“You sound like you would love to bed her, Gustav.”

“And why not? Like the security androids we built, Eve is fully capable of having sex with a Human and is anatomically correct to the last detail, at least externally, and has a full set of functioning genital organs, except for the reproductive aspect of them. Did you know that a number of human crewmembers on the NOSTROMO have formed permanent couples with security androids of the opposite gender? At least a dozen such couples even formally married, while one couple adopted a little war orphan girl and is presently raising her. But please keep that last information to yourself, Karina. Some bigots on Earth could raise a stink if they would learn about this.”

By now quite overwhelmed by all those revelations, Karina nodded her head then.

“Alright, I will keep mum about this.”

Their cabin finally stopped, with its door sliding open and showing a small anteroom with two doors and a staircase. One of the doors was opened and showed the inside of a small conference room where three women were sitting and waiting around a rectangular table. Karina recognized at once one of the women as being Captain **Tina Forster**, wearing an informal ship outfit. Forster immediately got up and walked to them to greet them with a solid handshake as they entered the conference room. She was fairly tall for a woman, standing a good 178 centimeters, and had long brown hair and grey eyes. Karina knew from the various news report about her that she was close to the age of fifty but she still looked fit, with little fat visible on her.



"Welcome aboard Gustav, and you as well, Miss Martens. Please, come and sit down. Would you like some tea or coffee before we start this meeting?"

"A cup of strong coffee would be nice, Tina." replied Gustav, followed by Karina.

"I will also have a cup of coffee, Captain."

"Please, simply call me 'Tina'. Can I call you 'Karina'?"

"You may, Cap... uh, Tina."

"Good! Give me a minute and I will serve you some coffee. Please sit down in the meantime and meet my executive officer, Dana Durning, also known as 'DD', and my chief-engineer, Rose Tillman."

Gustav and Karina shook hands with Durning and Tillman, then sat down opposite them at the table while Tina went to a coffee urn installed in one corner and poured two cups, which she then carried to the table on a serving tray, along with a small jar of cream and one of sugar. She then sat down and waited for her two visitors to have prepared their cups and taken a first sip before starting to speak, letting some worry show in her voice.

"Now that you have been able to see from the outside the damage to my ship, what is your first assessment about it, Gustav?"

"I am afraid that it is quite serious, Tina. Your bow shield has received extensive laser fire damage and has lost much of its structural integrity. It will have to be completely replaced, rather than us simply patching it up. Also, your cargo hold's outer door that was pierced by a laser beam will also have to be replaced. Since we have no spare bow dome or cargo hold door for your ship in our present stocks, we will have to have them built from scratch, something that will take at least two months to do. And we still haven't made any close inspections yet of your hull and of your internal structures and systems. I am afraid that your NOSTROMO will be stuck inside this drydock for at least three to four months, Tina, and that is an optimistic estimate."

"Three to four months!?" nearly exclaimed Tina. "But the Space Predators could show up anywhere at any time while we are in drydock, Gustav."

"I know but you will have to let the rest of the Navy deal with them for the time being. As you are, your ship is unfit for combat. The good news is that the Navy has given us permission to use the latest materials in terms of protective outer layer to rebuild your bow shield, at no cost to you. We will be able to replace your old composite ceramic blocks protecting your outer hull with new prismatic quartz blocks, something that will greatly improve your resistance to laser fire. On that subject, Karina mentioned to me that your hull is presently covered with matte black radar-absorbing paint. Do you

want that same kind of paint to be reapplied after we will have replaced your outer protective layer?”

“Yes, as much as possible! That paint helped us a lot in taking the Predators around Nordland by surprise.”

“Then, we will reapply it once your new prismatic quartz blocks are in place. Karina also wanted to offer you a choice of prismatic quartz colors, so that you could choose the type that is best in absorbing and dispersing the purple laser beams used by the Space Predators.”

“A very good point, actually. I would prefer the material type best suited to counter near-infrared laser beams.”

Karina quickly noted that on her personal data pad, then looked at Rose Tillman.

“Have you sustained any damage to your internal systems?”

“None that we have detected yet. All of our internal ship systems are fully functional at this time.”

“Good! While we will still conduct a thorough ship-wide diagnostic, this should save us many weeks of repair work. My engineering team will get at it right away after we leave.”

Gustav waited until Karina had finished her exchange with Rose Tillman, then looked at Tina Forster.

“Tina, there is something else that I would like to discuss with you: your security androids.”

“My androids? What about them?”

“Basically, during the last few months, they have proved highly effective in Space and ground combat operations against those damn Space Predators and my space yards would like to help our war effort by offering to build for you more security androids, for free. I would then consider that as my yard’s contribution to the war effort. By the way, this was an idea from Karina.”

Tina, like Dana and Rose, smiled on hearing that, with Tina nodding her head in salute at Karina.

“That was a nice thought from you, Karina. In truth, I could use as many more security androids as I could get. Right now, my own corporate world of New Haven is nearly defenseless and highly vulnerable to any attack by the Space Predators and I certainly could use a few hundred extra security androids to act as a ground defense force and to man heavy defensive batteries on New Haven. We also took on us to

protect the homeworld of the Kiryns, who have been the victims of the Space Predators, and that of the Hoshis, on Hyanesu. How many androids would you be ready to build for us, Gustav?"

"Would 2,000 more androids help you, Tina?"

Even Karina was shocked by that number, while Tina sucked air in, not believing her luck.

"That would be great, Gustav! Uh, would you then have objections if I would ask you to add a few small changes to the basic design of those new androids?"

"Such as?"

"Such as giving them the same kind of ability to ingest food and liquids as the one Eve and Spirit have presently. This may sound trivial but the years have shown me that the inability of my security androids to appear to be able to eat and drink normally seriously impacted on their social development and also attracted attention and suspicions on them when they were traveling outside of my ship. If that could be done without compromising their combat abilities, then it would be truly great."

"Hum, that will take some creative systems repackaging but I believe that it could be done. Anything else about your future androids?"

"Yes! Could you let Eve choose the external physical aspects and the personality types of those new androids, before you build them?"

"Eve is most welcome to stay here and work in collaboration with my robotics specialists, Tina."

"Excellent! One last point: would it be possible to add that eating and drinking capability to my existing androids? I am asking that because 23 of my present androids are married and are living as a couple with human members of my crew. One of them is even raising a little girl. For them, not being able to share meals with their families severely limit their socializing. I would be most grateful if you could modify them by adding that ability to eat and drink in reasonable quantities."

Gustav, like Karina, slowly nodded his head in appreciation, fully realizing now how much Tina cared about her security androids.

"I can and will do that, Tina, at no cost to you. Just let us a few days to study the best way to add that extra capability in your existing androids and you will then be able to send me by small batches the existing androids to be modified."

"Oh, Gustav, I could kiss you for that!"

"I would love that, but then I would have your husband chasing me around with a meat cleaver." joked Gustav in reply, attracting chuckles around the table. An amused Tina then gave him a big smile.

"How about a safer way to thank you and your shipbuilding crews? As you know well, my ship contains quite a few commercial ventures, clubs, restaurants and boutiques, which normally do business by offering their services and products for sale to our paying passengers. Since a three-to-four-month period without making any business could well bankrupt them, how about that I offer your people free access to my ship, so that they could use those businesses, shop around and be entertained. While your people would still have to pay for their meals and for the things they would buy aboard my ships, that would give their families a nice opportunity to avoid having to go down to the surface of the planet every time they would want to go shopping for new stuff. Also, many of my security androids have taken music, singing and dancing as personal secondary occupations when they are not on security duty and they are quite good at it, I assure you. We can also arrange for a few special events and shows, like medieval jousting tournaments, which I am sure could interest many of your people."

"Medieval jousting tournaments?" asked a surprised Karina. "Where?"

"In our Medieval World section, on our Horse Riding and Medieval Deck, on level 607. One of our security androids, Senior Centurion Jehanne de Domrémy, who by the way was made in the image of the famous French historical heroin Joan of Arc, developed a keen interest about the Medieval Period, particularly on the Hundred Year War, and in the old art of European sword fighting, also known as Historical European Martial Arts, or HEMA in short. That deck was previously used for agricultural purposes but, seeing the growing interest of many of my security androids for HEMA, plus knowing that my agricultural production would hardly be impacted in view of the dozens of other deck levels still growing foodstuff, I decided to convert that deck and build a replica of a medieval countryside, complete with a castle, three medieval villages, a Roman fortified camp, a couple of battlefields, large grazing plains and a horse-riding training ground. Our Medieval Deck then quickly became very popular with our paying passengers and also with outside visitors when we were docked in orbit while loading or unloading cargo. I am sure that your people would love to visit it and maybe watch a battle or joust reenactment."

"That sounds truly fascinating, Tina! I believe that my twelve-year-old son would love to see that."

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