

THRILLING TALES FROM BEYOND THE ETHER

RAYGUN REVIVAL

Faery Lights

by M. Lawrence Key

Nolan McGarry, Space Hobo

by Chris Mikesell

The Adventures of the Sky Pirate

Conclusion: The Friar of Briar Island

by Johne Cook

**Memory Wipe, Chapter Six -
A Rover's Price**

by Sean T. M. Stiennon

"The Ship," by Tomislav Tikulin

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Faery Lights

by M. Lawrence Key

Lonely places can make a man pure *loco*, if he's there long enough. That's how I knew for sure McDonnell had finally snapped. He showed up at my bunk at oh-dark-thirty and tapped me on the head to make his big announcement. Said he was going out to hang Christmas lights.

Only he said "faery lights," 'cause that's what they say over where he's from in Scotland. He had a whole mess of them hung in a big loop over one shoulder, and he must've mistaken disbelief for admiration when he saw me looking at them.

"I made them meself," he said, and you'd have thought he was a pullet who'd just laid a prize egg by the way he said it. He jingled the wire for me to see. He'd gotten bulbs from God knows where and attached them every half meter or so to a long coil of insulated wire he'd scrounged up. I gritted my teeth.

"Great, McDonnell," I said. "I hope you didn't rip that wiring or those bulbs out of something we need. Don't want to find myself without oxy in a week 'cause the warning bulb is twinkling outside."

A hurt look came into the hulking man's soft brown eyes. "Thought you knew me better than that, boyo," he said. "The bulbs are spares. So is the wiring. We've got plenty and you know it. Besides, it's just for Christmas and Hogmanay and then I'll take it down."

Suddenly, I tasted something like sour tequila in my mouth, and I spat it out. "Christmas is coming? How can you tell? By all the snow and ice outside? Or was it the carolers who just came by?"

McDonnell shook his head slowly. "You're

a good man in most every way, Clay," he said. "But you sure can be an arse when it comes to the holidays." He turned and trudged to the door of the bunkroom. "If you need me, I'll be outside," he said as he walked out.

I just stared at his retreating bulk. "Well have fun, and don't freeze anything important off," I said. With a grunt of annoyance, I turned over in the bunk and completely failed to go back to sleep.

I lay there in the bunk webbing, eyes open, thinking over what McDonnell had said. He'd made it sound like I was some kind of Scrooge. Me, Clay Morgan, the life of the party. Whatever. I closed my eyes, pushing down the irritation I was feeling, and thought through the day's schedule.

We had maintenance scheduled for modules D through F today, and if there was any time after that, maybe an expedition to take some ice core samples. I was reaching up to undo the bunk's webbing when I felt a tremor pass through me, and the whole station groaned. I swallowed hard and ripped open the webbing. Before I could get my stick-seal moccasins on the floor, McDonnell was on the station intercom, and judging by the sound quality, calling in from his suit helmet.

"Clay! Did you feel that?"

I answered him as I lurched out into the hallway outside the bunkroom. "Yeah, I felt it," I shouted. "On my way. Don't get your panties in a wad. Probably just Shireen letting off a little steam."

I loped along with the peculiar gait stick-seals force on you, but made it to the control room in record time. The seismic detection

board was whooping like a roughneck on a three-day bender. In a few seconds, I managed to push enough of the flashing buttons to get the infernal thing to calm down so I could figure out what had just happened. Didn't help that I had a crazy Scotsman shouting over the loudspeakers the whole time, asking for a report.

"All right, I got it!" I finally yelled. "Looks like a 4.3 event." I studied the IR Sat overlay on the topological map of the area on the screen in front of me. "Hey, McDonnell, look to the south. You should see a vapor eruption from the event."

A few seconds passed, and then: "Well, thar she blows," McDonnell said over the 'com.

"Did you get a picture?"

"Of course. You should be getting them now over the feed."

Sure enough, the lower right of the computer screen acknowledged reception of his camera shots—sixteen in all—of the ice geyser.

I sat at the console and began prepping the photos for my later report to Titan Base.

"You coming back in?" I said out loud as I held down the transfer key on the seismic station.

"Not yet," came the reply. "I'm almost done with the faery lights and I want to finish up."

A fresh wave of irritation pierced me like a hot knitting needle. What right had he to waste his time on something frivolous like that? He could have been killed when the station shook. Then I'd really be up a creek. I swallowed a sharp reply.

"All right. Come in as soon as you can. I've got a scheduled ice-coring to do later."

"Thanks, Clay. Knew you'd understand."

I grimaced as I shut off the 'com channel. He didn't have to be so nice about the whole thing, either.

#

I was suited up and ready to go out when McDonnell finally came back through the airlock. His pressure suit and faceplate were rimed with frost, which melted almost instantly when he hit the warm station interior.

McDonnell twisted off his helmet, revealing the bearded grin that went with his irrepressible enthusiasm.

"They're gonna be beautiful, Clay," he said. "Once I hook 'em up to an electrical source, they'll shine just like the town square back in Banff on Christmas Eve."

I raised my own helmet up and with a firm twist, locked it onto the neck ring. A quick thrust of my chin and the helmet com was active.

"That's great, McDonnell," I said. "Merry Christmas and all that. Maybe you'll even get the neighborhood association award this year. Happy now?"

I brushed past him into the airlock before I could see the hurt look that was undoubtedly coming over his face.

"I didn't get everything done on the maintenance schedule for modules D and E," I said, not bothering to add that his absence was the reason. He knew. "See if you can get to that while I'm gone. I'll be back in two shakes. Shut the airlock door, will ya?"

He shut it, all right. More like slammed it. He was mad, and I tried hard not to care as I checked my equipment and suit vitals. The airlock cycled to green and the outer door popped open. I went out.

#

I spent the next three hours in the shadow of an ice boulder as big as a three-story building, drilling deep. I grinned as I drew out a nice long core sample, pure and pristine, its layers clearly demarcated. This was what I'd come out here for, away from the people I'd known on Earth, away from the madding crowd, to cold and pure white and pale sunshine and utter darkness. Here, there was no clamor to disturb, for what little atmosphere that clung to this worldlet carried no sound. It was perfect. Too bad McDonnell had to keep bringing his old Earth traditions here and screwing things up. I sighed with exasperation. The man was a brilliant engineer, and the project couldn't get along with him, but still—

I sealed up the core sample and stowed it on the little one-man rambler that had brought me here. Straddling the rambler, I fired up its little electric motor, and in a moment, I was winding my way back through the maze of gigantic ice blocks to the station.

#

Only fifteen minutes later, I topped the last ridge and saw the station. Instinctively, I hit the rambler's brakes and it slowed. The station had changed. From end to end, its white painted pipes and panels were all wreathed in twinkling white lights. The dim ghost of Sol had sunk beneath the horizon hours ago, leaving only the baleful light that reflected from the colossal limb of the yellowish-brown orb that dominated our sky, sixty times as large as the Moon back home. Against the remaining darkness, McDonnell's faery lights flared out, looking like little lightning bugs as they flickered on and then off, on and off. I felt a little tension leave my body as I remembered chasing little lights on a West Texas lawn ages ago and catching them in a mason jar, where they glowed fitfully as they crawled on the glass. I keyed the radio transceiver in my helmet.

"McDonnell, I'm coming in. Just topped

the ridge." My next words took an effort to get out, but I felt I had to say them. "Lights look good, by the way."

"Clay!" McDonnell's voice came on, sounding breathless in my ears. "Thank God you're back. Come in, quick! Something's happened!"

I opened the rambler's throttle and quickly covered the remaining ground to the station's airlocks.

#

"You saw what?" I tried to keep the raw skepticism out of my voice, but I was fighting a losing battle. Across the control module's single conference table, McDonnell's eyes blazed at me.

"I ken ye would nae believe me," he said, his Scots accent grown thick nearly beyond comprehension from his excitement. He shoved a photo viewer over to me. "Take a look a' these, and maybe ye'll see I'm not some kind o' numptie."

I picked up the photo viewer and quickly leafed through the images stored on it, figuring I could ask him later what "numptie" meant. "Did you take these out the porthole in module D?" I looked up at him, my skin tense, knowing his answer before I asked my next question. "These aren't your Christmas lights, are they?"

"Look for yourself, Clay. They came *after* I switched my lights on, *after* my lights started blinking."

I held the viewer closer to the eyes, looking intently at the swarm of blurry points of light that contrasted with the black outside the porthole. "You're yanking my chain," I said.

McDonnell chose to ignore this. "And what's more," he said, "Once they showed up, the wee lights started blinkin' just like the faery lights I hung. Same rhythm. On and off, on and off. I took these pictures, and then

they just left."

I set the viewer down and cradled my forehead in one hand. "Where's that eggnog you made? You know, the stuff that has more nog than egg in it."

"You don't think I've been takin' some nips from my stash on the sly, do ye? I wasn't pished." He sounded shocked.

"No, McDonnell," I said. "I just want a stiff one, and that eggnog is the closest thing we've got on the station right now."

While he was fetching me the drink, I formulated my plan. I'd file a report with Titan Base, call it a sighting of an unexplained phenomenon, or something convoluted like that. Then we'd see about getting more evidence before we made any kind of announcement that would bring hordes of xenobiologists down on our heads. McDonnell came back with one for me and one for him. I sipped as much through the wide bore straw as I could, then gasped out loud as I felt the stuff burn its way down my esophagus. "All right, I'm ready to give the report," I said.

When I stood up, drink in hand, it happened. For a brief flash of time, I thought that the McDonnell family eggnog had hit me harder than I figured on. The room heeled over like the deck of a ship on the slope of a monster wave. Despite my stick-seal moccasins, I fell, missing out on a beautiful concussion only because of the low grav here. I tasted blood in my mouth from a bit lip. Behind me, I could hear McDonnell uttering something in a Scots accent so dense that I couldn't tell whether it was a stream of curses or a prayer. All around us, the station creaked and groaned as its massive bulk slowly shifted. It might weigh here a fraction of what it did on Earth, but mass is a constant, and it definitely was counting for something now.

I felt another rumble beneath us that rattled my teeth and, once again, I was thrown flat onto the decking as the behemoth that was our home began a terrible slide forward

and down. A shower of sparks cascaded from a closed white box near the ceiling, and we were in darkness, a blackness mitigated only by the glow of the icy wasteland outside filtering through our portholes.

Then there was a hum, and dim amber lighting glowed from hidden recesses throughout the control room. I lifted my head, trying to get my bearings, looking for the situation control board that might tell us what was happening and what our options were. Raising myself to hands and knees, I crawled to the far side of the room, making a detour around the island where the science station controls were. As I rounded the science station, I saw the McDonnell had already beaten me to the situation console. He was a mess, his nose streaming blood into his beard, but was methodically checking over the status displays as if he'd just strolled in here after exercise and a shower. He saw me coming and his head whipped around. His eyes were frantic.

"Don't move!" he hissed. "There's another quake about to—"

Like a sickening wave, the third tremor passed through the station before McDonnell could finish his sentence. I caught a glimpse of the stocky fisherman's son's body being catapulted over the console like he was a mere rag doll. I curled my fingers into the holes in the deck plating and hung on as the station tilted even further down. Above me, a pipe wrenched too far out of alignment and burst, sending a shower of scalding hot water down onto my neck and back. I screamed and writhed and lost my grip. I hurtled forward with the station's momentum, only to meet up with a metal floor cabinet that wasn't traveling as fast as I was. Unconsciousness followed on the heels of our little discrepancy in acceleration.

#

I awoke, disoriented, my mouth feeling as parched as Odessa in July. Wincing in

pain, I raised my head from the decking. As I surveyed the wrecked control room around me, my memory returned, and with it, panic. I rolled over, gasping aloud from the searing agony of my burned neck and back.

"McDonnell!" My voice was loud in the unnaturally silent control room. Except for the slow drip of the ruptured pipes above me, the place was as quiet as a tomb. Instantly, I regretted the import of my mind's comparison. If McDonnell were dead, if I were alone here—

I gulped and croaked out his name again. My gaze found his crumpled body just as his name left my lips that second time. Crawling to his side as fast as I could, I gently turned him over onto his back, supporting his neck as I did so. His chest moved and his pulse was strong. I opened his eyelids, checked for dilation, and noted the color in his cheeks. None of the ominous signs were there. I exhaled my relief and stood, confident that he'd come around in a few minutes with nothing more than a decent headache. In the meantime, I had to check the station status. Unsteadily, I made my way to the appropriate control panel.

#

When McDonnell opened his eyes and groaned about twenty minutes later, his first sight was me sitting near his head, my back against the station hull. He looked at me and blinked slowly, trying to clear his confusion.

"What's happened? What's going on?" he asked.

For the last ten minutes, I'd been thinking about exactly how to answer this inevitable question when he woke up. I'd thought of all kinds of nice long detailed explanations, but when the rubber met the road, I really only needed two words.

"We're screwed," I said.

He raised himself up on one elbow, holding

his head with the other hand like he was afraid it might fall off.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his words slurring slightly.

"We fell into some kind of sinkhole," I said. "Shireen's eruptions must have created a weakness in the ice crust beneath the station. Apparently, there was a cavern of some kind below us."

He started to speak, but I stopped him with a wave of my hand.

"Hold on. It gets worse. Our oxy and power generating module was smashed or ripped off—I don't know which—by an ice avalanche, the same one that we're mostly buried by right now."

His head came up, and I could see his eyes begin to clear through a supreme effort on his part to cut through the haze over his wounded brain.

"What about the reserve tanks?"

"Stripped off on our descent," I said. "The station computer doesn't detect them anymore. My guess? They're laying down in the crevasse under us somewhere."

"So how much do we have left?"

"Less than 12 hours, I think. We lost a bunch when the station fell and some of the modules sheared right off. The computer sealed off the breaches, but even so we lost a lot of oxy. We could make it stretch further if we breathe shallow and don't exert ourselves, but not by much."

McDonnell half-rolled and struggled to his knees.

"We've got to start a distress call," he gasped out, his chest heaving. "There's a helium-3 transport ship that will pass right over us on its transit to pick up mined gas. They're not supposed to stop here, but if we signal—"

I gripped his shoulder as he began to haul himself to his feet.

"Don't bother. I tried it. All communications are out. Our antennas were all torn off by the avalanche, too."

"Surely somebody'll come check on us when we don't report in," he said. His voice trembled as he held out the last little flame of hope, and his eyes begged me not to extinguish it.

I just shook my head. "No. We just made a report, remember? We're not due for another 10 hours or so. Besides, by the time they mount a rescue mission from Titan base, we'll be—"

"Don't say it." He clapped his hands to his ears and rocked back on his haunches, his massive body shaking like a leaf in a gale.

I just sat and watched him, unable to move a muscle. Part of me wanted to reach out a comforting hand, maybe whisper a few peaceful words in the face of our impending deaths. Yet the dominant part sat aloof as a courthouse statue, and the thought that came to my mind was: see, that's what you get for being a grinning idealist. The universe just comes around and kicks you in the teeth. So much for Christmas. We were going to be spending McDonnell's precious holiday in our own really expensive coffin.

I began mentally composing a little homily about how sometimes you just had to throw in the towel and accept cold hard facts like death, but before I could say anything, he raised his face to meet mine. His eyes shone with tears, but there was something else there, too.

"My faery lights," he said.

For a second, I couldn't respond to the last thing I would've expected him to say.

"What about them?" I said. "Though I dare say they're probably the only thing left on this

station that still works."

"Not *those* faery lights, though we are going to need them," he said. "I'm talking about the other ones, the ones that came when I turned on my strings of lights."

"What the heck are you talking about?"

"I think the faery lights can help us send a signal, a distress call."

He clambered to his feet, his pain and dizziness apparently forgotten in his excitement.

"Do you remember how they responded to the blinking of the lights? I think they're intelligent enough to repeat patterns. We can attract enough of them here and get them all blinking in a pattern—"

"Maybe the transport ship'll see it." I finished his sentence even as I rushed to the control board. "We've got enough electrical power to start up the lights, but it's gonna be close. We'll be using up the last of our emergency power batteries." I looked at him and held his eyes with mine. "After that, we'll start losing environmental control. We'll freeze before we run out of oxy."

He nodded his assent, and there was a new calmness in his demeanor, an assurance I found myself admiring.

"Then this had better work," he said.

#

It only took McDonnell fifteen minutes to program a simple relay switch into the lights' electrical system from the control board. Choosing the pattern that the lights would flash was a no-brainer. We both agreed it should be the oldest distress signal known to man: three short, three long and three short. When it was done, he joined me by the porthole in D module where I sat watching the lights.

Like me, he had donned his pressure suit. The heaters in our suits would keep us warm once the station lost environmental stasis, plus the oxy in our suit tanks would stretch us for few more hours, if it came to that. Our helmets sat in the middle of the floor, unused for now. No point in using up our suit oxy until we needed it. The oxy in our suit tanks would give us a few more hours, if it came to that, plus they'd keep us warm once the station lost environmental stasis.

I glanced up at him as he ducked through the door of the module. "What's the ETA on the transport ship?"

"It should be here in another 8 hours, give or take," he said. "Its planned trajectory should take it right over our position. If this works, the crew will see us all lit up like a Christmas tree."

"If this works." I shivered. It had to be my imagination, but it felt like the module was already growing colder. The station lights were completely out here, and we sat in darkness, our only illumination coming from the strings of lights hanging outside and the faint blue light that filtered down into the crevasse from above.

"We're deep down in the sinkhole," I said. "The transport'll never see us or our lights by themselves. We're gonna need a big swarm of your little friends if we have a prayer of the ship crew noticing their lights."

"Don't worry, Clay. They'll come."

McDonnell lowered himself, clumsy in his pressure suit, to a seated position on the floor opposite the porthole. He sat in silence, and the lights outside the thick glass alternatively bathed his face in a warm yellow glow, then plunged it into darkness every other second. After a while, he began speaking in a quiet voice.

"When I was a bairn, my dad was a fisherman on the North Sea. I don't have to tell you that it was dangerous, thankless work,

no matter the time of year." He scratched his beard thoughtfully. "When my dad was gone on a long fishing trip, my mum always worried about him. She tried not to show it, but I knew. The first night he was gone, she'd put a candle in the window of our house, the one that faced the cold, dark sea. And she would light that candle every night until he came home."

He turned his face to me, and in the sole illumination from the electric lights outside, I could now only see half of it.

"Somehow, I feel like we're doing the same thing now. Lightin' a candle, holding out hope against the cold and the dark. Against death."

A choking feeling arose in my throat, as if something that had lived like a weight in my chest for years was forcing its way out. I clenched my teeth to stop it, afraid of what form it might take when it left my mouth.

"Your dad always come back?"

McDonnell frowned at me, at the strangled tone of my voice, but he answered softly.

"Aye. Thank God, he passed away peacefully in his ripe old age in his own bed."

"Well, they don't always come back, you know?"

I closed my eyes, and there from the safety of the dark, recounted to him my own childhood, recalling a Christmas night standing in my front yard. The house behind me festooned with blinking lights, and me standing there in my PJ's, yelling till my throat was raw after a swiftly departing set of car taillights.

"I waited for him every Christmas after that, but he never came back. Never."

I ran my hands through my hair, clutched it until my scalp hurt. "So you can see why I don't get the warm fuzzies when I think about your precious holiday."

"Clay, I—"

"Don't you pity me," I snarled, surprising myself with the intensity of my sudden emotion. "I don't need anything from anybody, least of all anybody feeling sorry for me."

He shrank back, visibly wounded by my barbed words, and fell silent. I felt satisfaction and remorse at the same time and closed my eyes again, feeling hot pricks of water behind my lids. I sat in that darkness for awhile, and I must have dozed off, exhausted, for the next thing I heard was McDonnell's voice calling to me.

"Clay, wake up! They're here!"

Groggily, I opened my eyes and squinted up at the porthole. Outside, McDonnell's lights kept up their steady rhythmical blinking. But beyond them—

Once again I was on the front lawn of my childhood home, and I had a jar in my hands. All around me, in the summer night, glowing fitfully in the green grass between my bare toes, and flitting from mailbox to tree to sidewalk, was a myriad of fireflies. And now, impossibly in the subzero cold out there, they had come back. Hundreds of thousands of them, glowing little dots of light, each flashing in sync with our own creations of wire and glass, each sending our message to the world above.

I drew in a long, shuddering breath and rose to join McDonnell at the porthole where he watched them. His half-open mouth made a circle of fog on the surface of the glass as he breathed, and I stood beside him in the cold of module D and watched the intricate dance of the little faery lights outside. They couldn't know what message they were carrying for us—they were at best imitators no more intelligent than many of Earth's own sea dwellers. Yet even so, my heart inexplicably swelled to see them. For their message, whether they knew it or not, was one of hope. I swallowed my pride and looked McDonnell straight in the eye.

"Merry Christmas," I said to him, and I meant it this time.

#

Four hours later, we heard knocking on the station hull above us. McDonnell and I now had our helmets on, and frost climbed the walls of D module. The station batteries were at their last dregs, but they'd done their job. It was McDonnell who got up first, banging on the steel that arched above us with a large crescent wrench. He grabbed hold of the hatch wheel with his bulky gloves, trying to force it open. I rose to help him, both of us straining to break the frozen mechanism. With the last of our strength, we got it open, and the remains of the ice avalanche the rescuers had cleared away cascaded over our helmets and shoulders. The beam of a flashlight shone down on our ice-rimed faceplates, and, silhouetted beside it, a gloved hand reached down to us.

#

Once the transport ship's shuttle had lifted off, its pilot cruised back to join us as we sat, wrapped in thermal self-heating blankets and sipping warm coffee. He was chuckling and shaking his head.

"Man, you guys sure had a close shave back there. If we hadn't seen your signal, no telling when someone else would've been along."

"So you saw our signal, did you?" McDonnell said from under the hooded blanket.

"Yeah, how could we miss it? Seemed like half the southern polar region was lit up with your SOS. How'd you do that, anyway?"

McDonnell started to speak, but I jumped in first.

"It's a long story, Cap'n, believe me. Let's just say for now we had the best Christmas light display on the block, and lots of admirers came to see it."

The pilot looked back and forth to our faces, saw that we were sane, and then, wise man that he was, decide to drop the matter for the time being. He stood.

"Well, get some rest, gentlemen. We'll be back at the main ship in a few minutes."

After he retuned to the cockpit, I sat quietly and looked out the shuttle's windows as McDonnell nodded off. Out one side, I could see the ice fields of the cold, dark place from which we were ascending. Out the other side, there was the warm golden brown vista of our system's planet, and against its backdrop, the transport ship hung, its tanks slung low beneath the drive section. We were close enough now to where I could see its single shuttle port, and the twinkling illumination around it. I sat, wrapped in warmth, and watched as the lights guided us in.



M. LAWRENCE KEY

M. Lawrence wrote his first novella when he was 13 and living in the African bush with nothing better to do. He quickly realized he was born to be a writer, though it took another twenty years for that to sink in. In the meantime, he gained lots of life experience by working as an advertising salesman, a computer network administrator, and a bookstore clerk. He finally decided he liked living overseas better, and moved to the Middle East to teach English, where he resides today with his family. When he's not hanging out in cafes talking in Arabic with his friends and playing cards, he writes short stories.

Nolan McGarry, Space Hobo

by Chris Mikesell

The doors are halfway shut when the two young punks clamber on board, distracting me from my search of the dozen or so boxes discarded in the corner. I turn when I hear them come over. Under the guise of nodding hello, I look closely at their faces, and reflexively rub my stomach to calm the churning.

Don't get me wrong: while I prefer traveling alone, I like that you never know who you might meet stowing away in a starship's hold. Once you spend time together, though, it's always disappointing. These two I don't need to spend any time with to be disappointed. It's written in their eyes: 150 planets and nowhere to go.

Well, maybe one place, but they're certainly not headed there now.

I grunt a greeting and as a trio we finish ransacking the boxes. More than enough to see us across the system to Terra Centauri. Bottled water. Fruit tabs. SpaceChili.

Time was, not many remember it now, but time was when everything felt more exciting if it had the word Space before it. Things like SpaceLights (fluorescents as bright as the sun) or SpaceNectar ("Martian" Mango Madness, Sublime "Saturn" Strawberry, Rockin' "Rigel-7" RhubarBanana). Eventually, instead of conveying all things exotic, the word became the pet of advertisers with garbage hardly worth selling: the Walker SpacePen, for instance (not the writes-upside-down pen from the Moon Shots a century ago, those are still great; the Walker was just an ordinary pen with Space prominently displayed on the packaging).

Personally, I like the title Space Hobo. I may

not be worth much, and I'm far from exotic, but I've made peace with that. These two, though, Cargo-Riders or Freightboys—call 'em what you like, anything but Drifters—they can keep their new titles; I've been a Space Hobo going on thirty years. Only other thing people sometimes call me is "Santa" or "Moses," on account of the beard (not yet fifty and it's already gone white). No one's called me Nolan McGarry since I left home.

Naturally, this time of year, my traveling companions call me Santa.

It's four days out and I still don't know their names. Don't care to. Red and Blondie I've called them the few times I've addressed them directly, and they've taken to calling each other that, too. Or maybe those really are their names.

It's our final night and I'm sitting across the plasma firepit from them, scooping chili out of the can with my fingers. I reposition my heat-recirculating blanket beneath me where the chill of the triple-hulled metal floor stings my legs. I glance over at the corner of the room where I've been sleeping, far from Red and Blondie, far from the firepit, and shiver. It's coming up on Lights Out; we'll do The Exchange soon.

Like any occupation—that is, that which keeps you occupied—the life of people like me is filled with Traditions. Only forty-five years folks have been doing this, but they're still Traditions with a capital T.

The Exchange is one of them. Campfire tales around a green plasma glow. The stories change with the season: the farthest you've been from Earth in August (the month by whoever's reckoning of the Solar Calendar

seems most lucid); where and how you learned a special talent in May. December is "The Best Gift I Ever Received." Smokesticks are divvied up afterward. (In March it's socks—no one remembers why—but it's best if you've safeguarded a clean pair of your own so you're not stuck with someone else's dirties.)

While we left most of the notions of religion behind when we took to the stars, the Golden Rule's still with us. Or maybe it's just plain Karma. If your brother's worse off than you, help him out. The shipping companies learned that the hard way early on when they tried kicking Space Hoboes out of empty cargo units or released the MagLoc bolts on the freight doors mid-trip. Bad things started happening: wormholes, raiding parties, crews up and disappearing. Now we're a token of good luck, like the albatross from the ancient poem. Even we know better than to let harm come to one of our own, and the only Drifters now are those who lose hope and short out the MagLocs themselves. Smokesticks these boys don't need, but maybe they'll come out of The Exchange with what they do.

Maybe.

The pair across from me are whispering, foreheads almost touching. When you've been at this as long as me—and there's not many who have—you grow familiar with the habits of the young. Familiar, perhaps, because you can still remember when you did the same. I don't need to hear their stories to know they're going to shine me on. Drew four aces and remembered to play your bluffer's tell instead of wetting your pants. The captain of a Neptune-class ship like Orion's Belt or the New Titan offered you luxury accommodations on a trip back to Earth. The old geezer at last year's Christmas Exchange passed around Primonantays.

But things like that never happen. Not when you're tramping. If the captain leaves half a crate of limes in the hold, now that's something to grow misty over.

So I know these two are negotiating who gets to tell which story. I peg Red, who's already missing a couple teeth, will go with at least an inside straight. Blondie: a nine-day trip to Capricorn-Prime with passionate Freightgirls, most likely. He's still got looks enough to make it plausible.

"Santa, will you start us out?" Red asks.

I take a drink of water to clear the chili out of my throat. "Last'll do me."

When you don't plan on bluffing it always pays to go last.

Blondie begins with "I never thought it would happen to me, but—" and it's no problem nodding and hooting in the right places. Only a three-day planet hop, though; the boy has self-esteem issues.

Red doesn't. He draws four cards to a royal flush and postpones the final ace until the second discard just to build suspense. He tells the story well, I'll give him that, but champagne is still only so much Korzo's SpaceWine. (Korzo's is fine by me, but don't dress it up as something it's not.)

The lights above us wash over blue as Red waxes nostalgic about his imaginary six thousand in chips. Five minutes to tell my story before the lights go out and the fire dies down to gas-jet embers.

A minute-ten more than I really need.

"It was Christmas," I begin, "thirty-two years ago. I was fourteen, living in Colony-4 on Terra Centauri. Me and my dad."

I stare at the fire, count to five. "Me and my dad."

Out of the corner of my eye I catch the boys nodding.

"We'd been there three years—came across with the first seeding ships. Dad knew hydroponics, and while the first two colony domes would always be out of our reach, Dad

said Col-4 was only temporary. Not that it was a bad place. The climate was usually under control and the water was mostly fresh.

"But this Christmas..." One two three four five "...this Christmas the hoverbike I expected turned out to be used coveralls and my dad's old hydroponics texts. 'Be good to spend more time together, son.'"

"Uh huh," I said. "'What's next?'"

I wipe a tear off my cheek with the meat of my palm. (Third time I've brought myself to tell this story; you'd think I'd be used to it by now.) A sniffle across the fire assures me I'm not alone in feeling homesick.

"Course that's not the end of the story. It gets better. After a couple more non-hoverbike gifts and a two-minute vidcall to my grandparents back on Earth, Dad said he had to get something from the storage shed."

On the other side of the fire the boys are grinning expectantly.

"He was forever in coming back. I went out to see if he'd been hurt or was going to jump out with the hoverbike, but he wasn't there. Inside the shed were his tools, some H-pon equipment...and one more thing—"

"What?" gasps Blondie.

"My independence. Best gift a dad could give a kid."

Sniffles. Choked sobs. Playing a harmonica should be so easy.

"My independence," I repeat as the lights dim and I offer the boys a couple smokesticks. They refuse.

"My folks," Blondie says, "I haven't seen them in almost a year."

Red doesn't say anything, but he twists at the ring on his left hand.

"What're you boys riding freight for?" I

offer the sticks again.

They take them, but don't light up or answer my question. Red mumbles a goodnight before the two disappear into their blankets.

I stand and watch over them a minute, watch the uneven rise and fall of their breathing patterns, listen to their muffled sobs as the lights strobe out and the fire dies. Why does causing them sorrow make me feel so proud? Ashamed, I retreat to my sleeping area.

As I settle in, a muffled sob escapes from my own pile of blankets. For the boys. For myself.

When we land in Terra Centauri tomorrow I expect Galactic Bell will make out nicely with a couple collect vidcalls. Will Red and Blondie's families welcome them home with open arms? If ever they had a chance it doesn't get better than this time of year.

Me? I'll hold my annual vigil outside the shed if it's still there. Maybe Dad finally found what it was he went out to get. Perhaps he'll know where to find a son who'd be glad to spend time with him. Haven't run into him on any of my journeys, so maybe he's still out looking. Maybe he's dead. But I've got hope.

Red and Blondie, they've got what it takes to make it through one more night, I think. One of the piles of blankets by the firepit has begun to snore. But I'll sleep under the MagLoc junction box just to be safe.



CHRIS MIKESELL

In November 2004, Chris Mikesell scribbled "I am a writer" on an index card as an exercise for National Novel Writing Month. Today, he's still wrestling with the manuscript he completed that month. But the index card trick seems to have worked.

*He garnered his first publication credit at the end of 2005 with a submission to **The Wittenburg Door**. His '06 short fiction and poetry credits include **Infuze Magazine**; **Flashing in the Gutters**; **Dragons, Knights, and Angels Magazine**; **Flashes of Speculation**; and another piece at **The Wittenburg Door**. He is one of several writers journaling as **Wilbur Hucks** at novelist **Brandilyn Collins'** character blog, **Scenes & Beans**.*

He is considering writing "I believe I am a writer" next time he opens a pack of 3x5 cards.

He lives near Eugene, Oregon, with his wife and their son. His blog is located at <http://mikesell.blogspot.com>.

Featured Artist:

Tomislav Tikulin

Name: Tomislav Tikulin

Age: 32

Hobbies: Watching movies. Other than that, I love my job and I don't need hobbies. ;)

Favorite Book / Author: "Dune" saga - Frank Herbert, "Rendezvous With Rama" - Arthur C. Clarke, Roger Zelazny

Favorite Artist: Too many to list.

When did you start creating art?:

For years I was also working as a comic-colorist, brushing my skills in digital art. I was involved in the production of point & click adventure. I was Chief 2D artist on that project. This was a turning point for me; after that I begin to work illustrations.

What media do you work in? Various digital applications.

Where your work has been featured?

I work for *Editions J'ai lu*, *PS publishing*, *Desperado comics*, *Smart Learning*

Where should someone go if they wanted to view / buy some of your works?

<http://www.tomtikulin-art.com/>

What were your early influences? Chesley Bonestell...I like old masters.



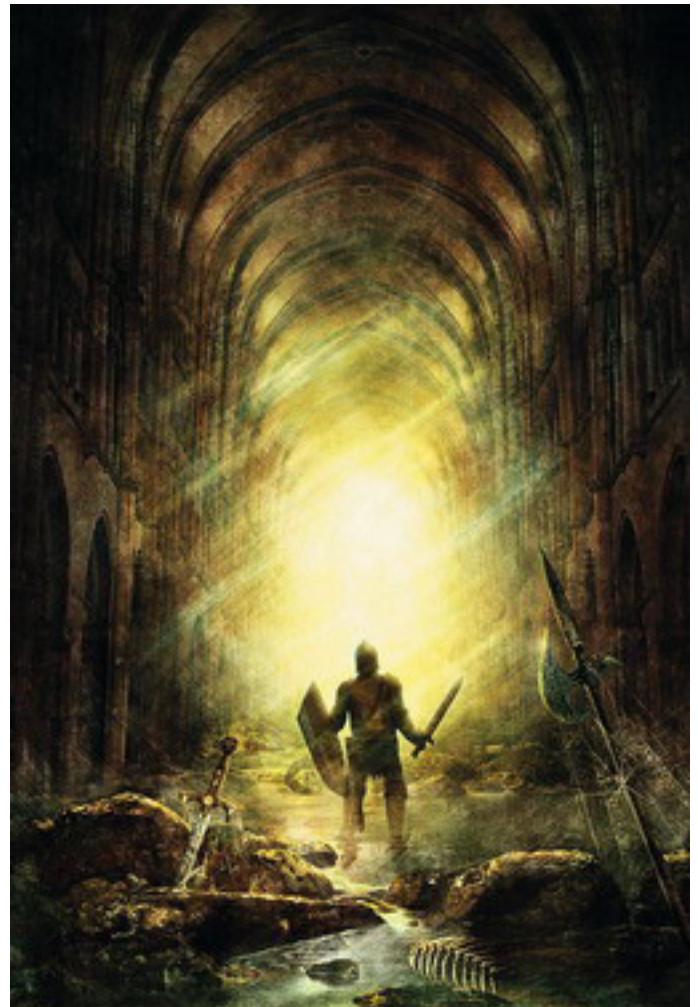


Where do you get your inspiration / what inspires you? Well, I like old masters, old stories. I'm not a big fan of modern cyberpunk stories, Matrix etc. As a kid, I had a chance to watch good classical movies from the Golden Age of Science Fiction. Movies have great impact on me. Many good Sci-Fi movies from the 60s, 70s, and 80s, even the trash movies from 50'. Jack Arnold is my favorite director from this period. Of course, I've watched Star Wars, Star Trek (original crew), and Alien a million times, as well as others like Blade Runner, Legend, The Right Stuff, and so forth. Yes, I'm a geek! My heart is full of sorrow because Hollywood doesn't make Sci-Fi films like they used to.

What have been your greatest successes? When an editor from France ask me to make covers for *Rendezvous With Rama*!

What tool / equipment do you wish you had?
A clone of myself. ;)

What do you hope to accomplish with your art? To have fun, to make lots of covers, to make covers for Frank Herbert's *Dune*, and one day to create production illustrations for a big Sci-Fi movie.



The Adventures of the Sky Pirate

The Friar of Briar Island - Conclusion

by John Cook

The Story So Far:

Flynn arrived on Parrot Bay looking for some human interaction. He met the Friar, a man who befriended Flynn and then betrayed him.

Flynn left Parrot Bay looking for vengeance, but found one surprise after another on foreboding Briar Island, culminating with the announcement by the Friar at the Briar Throne.

#

Cooper Flynn gaped at the sight of the Friar seated on the Briar Throne. “Ruler?”

“‘Founder’ is more exact,” said the Friar. “They mostly call me ‘Your Grace,’ which is, itself, a joke. I wouldn’t have stuck around but they’re all so earnest and sincere with their gratitude, and this location happens to be a perfect hidden base to conduct operations to disrupt Sylvan shipping lanes. Anyway.”

He sat up straight, and the likeable piratical goof was suddenly gone. The Friar transformed before Flynn’s eyes in that moment into somebody serious, competent, transparent, regal. “You have my full attention. I will answer anything you ask while I’m on this throne.”

The carefully rehearsed questions and accusations and suspicions fell away from Flynn. To buy time, he countered, “What about when you’re *not* on the throne?”

“Then all answers are automatically suspect.” The Friar winked.

Flynn snickered despite himself. He collected his thoughts, cocked his head, and asked the question foremost on his mind.

“Who *are* you, really?”

The Friar smiled and put his fingertips together as he pondered his answer. “There are a couple of different ways to approach that, but as I’m sitting here, I will be completely forthright—I am nobody.”

Flynn nodded to himself. It sounded like an honest reply. Each new revelation pushed Flynn further from his carefully nurtured hurt and anger. Flynn found himself getting caught up in the complexity of a man he thought he’d figured out, and the effect was hitting him in a strange way.

“I am a man of no account, a vagabond, a former citizen chased out of Haddiron more years ago than I can remember. I came to the islands here much like you, a young man looking for an unspecified something, and finding something else, a genuine life here among the islands, among the mountains, among the locals.”

“How did you find this place?”

The Friar smiled as he revisited the scene in his memory. “I found the Dragon’s Maw by accident, taking refuge there during a storm. I discovered a fissure in the rock and followed it here. I found an island rich with promise and resources, and utterly deserted except for herds of animals and one family of large black cats. I had killed a rabbit and had a haunch of meat roasting. I saw a shadow approach me from behind. I slowly turned around, and there she was. I could have run or fought, but I didn’t. Instead, I gave the matriarch the meat, and, wonder of wonders!, she accepted the offer, and she accepted me. Her cubs learned from her example.” The Friar looked positively smug. “And that’s how I came to have my own personal line of ‘monsters.’” He smiled as he relived the memory.

"Like you, I sailed to Parrot Bay looking for one thing and found something else. The natives gave me a friendly greeting but I discovered soon enough that they maintain an absolutely inflexible superstition. They believe that evil spirits possess mentally afflicted children, and so they kill them. Like you, I couldn't let that pass, and before I knew it, I'd 'rescued' one such and spirited her away. Having nowhere else to go, I brought her back here and built her a hut, being careful to show her how to feed the Mother Monster.

"I didn't count on her brother mounting a search back on Parrot Bay. I warned him away from the island and started the rumor of the monster of Briar Island, but he was determined to find her, no matter what. He was an irritant at first and quickly became impossible, following me everywhere I went, so I 'killed' him.

"I brought him here, showed him the island, delivered him to his sister, and then told him he had a choice—stay here and care for her, or die for real.

"He stayed and helped me build this colony. As new unfortunates cropped up on Parrot Bay, we spirited them away under cover of night and cared for them here.

"The island community grew, slowly at first. Then one day, Sylvan raiders nearly burned Parrot Bay down. I recruited local sailors, boarded the Sylvan ship, and took them over: our first naval action. After years suffering as easy pickings for Sylvan raiders, the local sailors liked the chance to fight back. The crew was born out of that first successful defense."

"Why hasn't the monarchy come after you? I would have thought that having one's own private navy wouldn't sit well with Her Majesty."

The Friar leaned forward in anticipation and his eyes shone. "It was the greatest moment of my 'career.' Some years passed and then I received the most remarkable message from the Haddiron monarchy. Her Majesty wrote that she understood we were mounting a

defense out on the edge of the empire, and she declared me a Paladin before the crown, the Defender of Parrot Bay. She endorsed our activity on behalf of the crown and made it official."

Flynn scrunched his eyebrows. "I thought you were a pirate."

The Friar reclined. "It is a fiction I find useful. The truth of the matter is that we are fully licensed Privateers working on behalf of the Queen, keeping the Sylvan empire at bay, and growing the Parrot Bay economy while building everything you see here on Briar Island."

"Does Haddiron know about the hidden base?"

"As long as we do what we're supposed to and keep Sylvan ships at bay in these waters, they don't ask questions about our operation or our methods, and we don't volunteer. I needed a cover, so I became the Friar, a blood-thirsty pirate, using that persona as a cover for my other, uh, philanthropic endeavors. You should see our library here—it's quite diverse and is my private treasure."

Flynn nodded in approval, but his mind was racing. *How does that square with what he did to me, then? Why did he 'betray' me?* The question was worth asking, so he did. "So what happened back there with the slowboy and the cleric and everything? And who is Blind Bart, and why did you have me brought here?"

He laughed. "Blind Bart wrecked my first ship on a reef. I had to go capture another. I was ready to throw him to the fishes when he rushed up to me and swore that he knew what was going on and how to learn from the experience. He became my best navigator. He sailed for me for twenty years and retired recently on Parrot Bay. He acts as my eyes and ears over there."

The Friar leaned back and was suddenly sad, the most transparent he had been since they had met. "You are not the only one

who has attempted to swim the channel," he said. "Nobody was more surprised to see the slowboy over at Parrot Bay than me, but I couldn't break my cover to rescue him. And then, thank Cyl, you showed up out of the blue. However, there are hidden evils on Parrot Bay, and you, through no fault of your own, delivered the slowboy from the barracuda to the shark when you turned him over to the Cleric.

"The Cleric was never about purely spiritual matters. That was a front. He built up a tidy side-business in addition to holding meetings and conducting marriages and funerals. He knew that I was taking the disaffected and the unwanted. He just didn't know why. I shudder to think what wild and colorful vices he imagined of my character. And since I am often away from the island, he began to collect those lost souls himself, spirit them away to caves outside of town, and then sell them to me off to the side. That turned into an elegant solution to a nagging problem, and he became my unwitting agent in protecting the disaffected from a superstitious community.

"But somebody in my crew is a mole, a spy, perhaps Sylvan, perhaps something else, and that one has been chipping away at me."

Flynn didn't know what to make of any of this, so he waited, enrapt, wheels spinning in his own head.

"I married a local girl," said the Friar, and if Flynn thought he couldn't be any more surprised, he was wrong. "She was young and beautiful, smart and devoted. When our hale young are old enough to spread their wings, we quietly send them to Haddiron to University or off to the Naval Academy, or wherever. But she stayed and ministered to me when I was sick and prevented me from destroying myself with rum and violence. She kept me from growing into my own legend.

"We had a child, a boy, but by some twist that I don't understand, our son was... Well, she died in childbirth, and I raised him myself with the help of this growing community. He loves me, and I him, but he takes it hard when

I'm gone, and I'm gone frequently.

"One day, he discovered the whereabouts of the Dragon's Maw, and the rest of the wide open world. He followed me to the boats and watched me set out for Parrot Bay. And then he swam over after me."

The Friar looked Flynn in the eye. "The slowboy you saved was my son."

Flynn sat down cross-legged on the bamboo floor. *I didn't see **that** coming.*

The Friar continued. "Somehow, the cleric discovered that the slowboy was mine own, and he was going to use that knowledge to control me. It was only a matter of time before I would have to choose between the life of my son and the lives of the people here on the island. But the cleric made two crucial errors; he thought I didn't know where his hiding place was in the caves, and he thought he could manhandle you. He was wrong about both things.

"I saw something in you that I'd seen before in myself, so I heaped misfortune upon you, and for that, I am sorry. I got you drunk and gave Wrebi your pouch to take you to your boat while I went and retrieved my son from the holding cave. Then I put him somewhere safe while he slept. Then I returned to the tavern in time to greet you when you awoke the following day. When we met the cleric, he mistakenly thought that you had followed him to his cave, and thought you were holding the slowboy to gain power over *him*, and that's something he couldn't bear."

Flynn's eyebrows furrowed in thought. "Did you know the cleric was Qantiin?"

The Friar sat up with a jerk. "What?! I thought he was just a fallen clergyman."

Flynn smiled grimly. "No matter. I've dealt with his kind before."

The Friar sat back and smiled with renewed appreciation. "I was right about you," he said, and the words were a balm to Flynn's battered spirit.

"So why did you abandon me to fight the cleric? You saw he had a sword."

The Friar smiled broadly. "I'm not a *complete* saint. I saw a chance to get my son off the island while the cleric was preoccupied, and your boat was the closest at hand. I had to make a fast decision. The way I figured it, if you survived, you'd follow us back over to Briar Island, where I could make my apologies and I could make it up to you. He's out there, back where he belongs, with people who love him and take care of him."

"And if I didn't survive?"

The Friar had a wicked grin when he needed it. "If you didn't survive, you wouldn't be missing your boat anyway."

The audacity of it hit Flynn strangely. He started snickering at the boldness of it, then giggled, then howled with laughter.

A figure appeared silhouetted by the pool. "Your Grace, it is time."

The Friar waved a casual hand. "Thank you, Pikir. We'll be right there." He rose and leaned forward, holding out his hand to Flynn.

"Time for what?" asked Flynn as the Friar pulled him to his feet. They started walking back the way they'd come.

"Time to go to work," said the Friar, grinning.

#

And so Flynn found himself back in the courtyard, watching the Friar climb the speaker's rock. Pikir stood by with a parchment in his hand. The Friar took the parchment as he faced the crew of the Venture.

"Let's see, tonight, we have the return of the Volcanal Merchant Express—should be fat ships and easy pickings. If the Sylvans keep to their rigorous schedule, they'll be sailing without the man o' war, so we should be relatively unchallenged. You know the drill—the second crew will take control of the ship and

sail her to the auction yards at Fenner Point. Get a good price and charter a return trip to Parrot Bay. Stay there and celebrate in the local taverns and eateries, and we'll pick you up in four weeks. Board up!"

Pikir handed a sword to the Friar hilt-first. The Friar turned to Flynn and held out the sword along with a small but heavy pouch. "Master Flynn, we come to a milestone for you. I promised you many things when you came to Briar Island: a monster, answers, and—tacitly—opportunity. We go to do our principled pirating, the life of a privateer in clandestine service to Her Royal Majesty of Haddiron. From here on, you are free to return to *The Lone Wolf* and go where you please with my blessing, or you may choose to join us on the high seas of adventure. What say you?"

The Friar smiled, and the dazzling sunshine of his uninhibited personality lit Flynn's soul again. Flynn basked in the moment, reveling in the pure, unmerited favor of grace. It was glorious. He had waited all his life for a moment like this. The crowd quieted as they realized that they were present at something special. Everyone felt it, the arrival of a historic moment.

A single niggling thought intruded in Flynn's consciousness like the barest shadow flitting across one's face in the full, strong sun. It was such a little thing, but it was enough.

The moment shattered. Flynn struggled in vain to retrieve the feeling, but the truth was brutal, and would not let go. The knowledge of that one thought grew and quickly overwhelmed him. A thought, once created, cannot be reclaimed, and now its ramifications were filtering with the speed of thought through his logic centers: this morning, Flynn hadn't planned on how to leave the island, just how to enter it. He understood, then, that he had not expected to live, and now that he was being granted his life back, everything fell apart.

Or more precisely, everything fell together.

A smoldering anger ignited and spawned a blistering arrogance. If he had to put his finger on it, the thought might be summed up in three words: 'Not So Fast.'

Flynn looked at the Friar and a fire flared up in his black eyes. Flynn smiled, and it was a fearsome thing. "What do I say?"

He took a deep breath and addressed the assembled audience. What came up out of him was unrehearsed but long repressed, a reborn Phoenix of bitterness and rage. "I *say* that any man so cavalier with my present well-being is not worthy of my future goodwill. I *say* that I will reclaim my boat as I swore when this day started and take my own chances out on the high waters. I *say* thank-you for my property and for the lessons you have taught me. I *say* you can keep your blood money and your situational 'honor' and throw them at some other impressionable lad."

Flynn turned and looked the Friar in the eye. He lowered his voice and spoke just to him. "I *say* that I am now a man, and I don't need you or anybody else. Good *day*, 'your Grace.'"

Flynn took his sword, slapped the bag of gold aside, spurned the outstretched hand, and brushed roughly by. He hopped down off the rock and strode arrogantly through the silenced crowd.

He didn't look back.

He was shaking by the time he walked through the tunnel to docks, whether with rage or with some other emotion, he could not say.

He boarded *The Lone Wolf*, true to his word, and rowed out of the Dragon's Maw until he was far enough out to unfurl his sail and leave that place behind forever.

He didn't actually weep until he was well away.

#

Flynn wiped his traitorous eyes on his sleeve and took the first prevailing wind he found, heading in a southerly direction toward Volcanal. He didn't think, didn't desire, didn't stop—his entire focus was on sailing *away*, his jaw clenched so tight that his teeth ached.

The weight of the moment caught up to him. "Gah!" he roared as the sun started to set to starboard. "If you think I'll fall for that after what I went through, you have another thing coming! I'm not some hick without a thought to his head, and I won't be pushed around. I made sure the slowboy was safe, and I retrieved *The Lone Wolf*. I did what I said! I did what I said!!"

He stomped down below deck, looked around restlessly, and stormed back up to the tiller empty-handed. "How could I kill him? Which 'Friar' should I attack? There are so many! Gah!"

He would have paced if he were on dry land, but the waves were getting larger, as if there were a coming storm, so he kept his seat and the nervous energy had nowhere to go. "Nobody owns me! I am the Captain of my own boat. I'm in charge of my own fate!" And there it was, out in the air at last.

After saying it out loud, reality ricocheted off his consciousness. He blinked and actually started thinking again.

Where was he going? What was he doing? The Friar had made him a pretty good offer, and the feeling of acceptance had been the best feeling of Flynn's entire life. He'd been offered a chance to be a part of something for a change, an opportunity to strike back at an enemy worth fighting.

That's when he heard the boom of a single gun and the whistle overhead of a cannon ball.

#

*No! Not now! Not right now! Anytime but **now!*** The geyser erupted to starboard but Flynn had already turned to look toward

the source. His worst fears were confirmed; it wasn't the fat Sylvan merchant ships, it was the Sylvan man o' war, and it was all by itself. Hunting.

Flynn's gaze focused in on the bow of the great warship facing north toward Parrot Bay.

There are moments in life where all becomes clear in one ferocious revelation. The Friar had spoken of a milestone, and Flynn was finally free to consider the full meaning of his words, except that he had an enemy warship shooting across his bow, and he had just had a critical epiphany.

In that moment, Flynn knew it was time for a decision, not just a *fast* one, but the *right* one, the *perfect* one. Flynn had a very strong sense that what he did next would change the path of the rest of his life.

It wasn't just a milestone—it was a crossroads.

"I," he said very clearly to the ocean around him, "am a fool."

The sun was dipping below the sea to the watery horizon to the West, the Friar and the Venture were preparing to weigh anchor in the Dragon's Maw, unwittingly sailing into danger, and the Sylvan man o' War was approaching from the southeast.

And then, on top of everything else, that was when the final piece fell into place. Flynn remembered that the Friar had mentioned in passing that there was a mole within the Friar's crew, somebody willing to attack the Friar from within. At that moment, Flynn snorted and shook his head.

He knew perfectly well that he'd been willing to kill the Friar himself, but that would have been a straight-up fight, an honorable disagreement between men. Flynn had had enough of hidden assassins to last a lifetime, and his thoughts turned to ways to reveal the mole.

The memory returned to Flynn, and he saw the scene play out in his mind's eye. *I released*

the bird and watched it for a long time. It flew to the West. In the background, there was the now-familiar profile of...

Flynn sat up straight. He had it. Of all the places for the Qantiin carrier bird to fly, it had flown to Briar Island! Flynn suddenly knew how to smoke out the mole.

All those thoughts raced through Flynn's mind. He twisted around and looked back for the first time since storming out. The Dragon's Maw was dimly visible. The *Venture* had not yet put out to sea heading for the Volcanal.

He still had time.

What is it about life that you see your destiny when you can no longer choose it? Flynn thought. *I am a fool. I know where I belong. Unfortunately, I'm not even in a position to accomplish anything, even if I sacrifice myself. Unless...*

Flynn was moving even as the idea blossomed. He dove below deck. He grabbed a rucksack and started tossing in everything he needed. He was done in moments. He took one last look around the hold, grabbed the ceramic lamp, and went back up topside. He ran one hand lovingly across the tiller and then drew back his arm and threw the ceramic lamp against the mast, shattering it and coating the bottom of the sails with oil.

He dropped the flint and stone on the deck and scrabbled around by feel. He found them, switched hands, and started striking the flint, *rap rap rap rap*. He dropped a spark onto the oil and it lit immediately.

Flynn yanked the rudder around hard to starboard and pointed her straight into the sinking sun and the oncoming storm. He hooked his sword's scabbard around his neck to the left and hooked the rucksack over his right shoulder. Everything else would have to remain with the ship.

The sail ignited with a whoosh, singing his eyebrows, and he fell backward onto the deck, landing on his rucksack and rolling onto his side. The flames roared up the mast, lighting

up *The Lone Wolf* like a waterborne runaway campfire. Flynn rolled to his feet, caught his balance as the boat descended into a trough, then catapulted himself overboard into the cold, dark water.

When the ship rose up on the wave, all-afire, he was treading water behind it. The current and the wind carried the boat away from him. Flynn bobbed up on the top of a wave and saw the Sylvan man o' war coming around, already following the bait.

Flynn smiled an impish grin where he treaded water, and then turned and struck out for the Dragon's Maw.

#

Flynn caught the *Venture* coming out of the Dragon's Maw. He swam up to the ship and climbed up the ropes arranged amidships. He poked his head over the rail and spied Pikir. "Hey!" Flynn said, and waved damply.

To his credit, Pikir was a fast study. "Master Flynn!" He dashed forward and helped Flynn clamber over the rail and onto the main deck. "Wait here, I'll fetch the Friar."

A small crowd of sailors started to gather around Flynn, slapping him on the back and shaking his hand.

A deep voice boomed from the elevated fore-deck. "Flynn!" The Friar took the wooden steps two at a time until he pushed forward through the crowd to stand in front of Flynn.

Flynn sketched a casual salute. "Permission to come aboard, Cap'n."

"Flynn! You're returned!" The Friar gestured to a sailor. "Take his effects to his quarters and bring back some towels. Please notify Cook that we'll be feasting tonight!"

"Sir? Which quarters?"

"Next to the First Mate."

"Aye, Sir."

Flynn spoke. "I came back because there is a Sylvan man o' war out there right now and I thought you should know about it."

The Friar's eyes narrowed. "Where is *The Lone Wolf*?"

Flynn's eyes sparkled in the lamplight. "Unless I miss my guess, she is a mile or three away by now heading to the south-southwest, with the Sylvan warship in hot pursuit."

The Friar looked a question at Flynn.

"Captain, I was a fool. My pride was wounded and I wasn't man enough to accept your decision. But all that changed when I saw the Sylvan warship. I sensed that milestone you spoke of, only it was larger than that, it was a crossroads. I knew that what I did next would affect the rest of my life, and I want my life to mean something.

"After that, it was easy. I decided if I couldn't sacrifice my present to change my past, I might at least sacrifice my past in order to change my present. So I lit up *The Lone Wolf* and set her on her final journey, on a course to draw the warship away from the Dragon's Maw. I destroyed my ship to buy time to save your ship."

"Our ship," said the Friar, firmly. "Welcome aboard the *Venture*!," and a roar of approval went up among the crew.



JOHNE COOK

Johne Cook is an Overlord (Co-founder and Editor) of Ray Gun Revival magazine.

Johne is a Technical Writer and a long-time space opera fan.

Memory Wipe

Chapter 6 - "A Rover's Price"

by Sean T. M. Stiennon

The Story so Far: *Three years ago, Takeda Croster woke up in the city of Greendome on the colony world of Belar with no memories, no connections, and no possessions aside from the clothes he was wearing and an Imperial citizenship card with his name on it. He worked at the Silver Sun casino, ignored by most, until one night when he began to manifest superhuman powers in a fight against two corrupt cops: enhanced senses, great strength, lightning-fast reactions. He seriously injured both cops. Strange dreams and a feeling of great exhaustion followed the encounter.*

Now, Takeda has left Belar, fleeing from the corrupt police official Captain Brian Vass. His only companion is a mysterious Lithrallian hunter named Zartsi who saved his life in the jungles. Together, the two of them hijacked a ship and landed on the planet Freedan, in a rainy industrial city called Freesail.

After his powers helped him to injure the son of Nathan Clane, gaining him a vendetta with the powerful Clane gang, Takeda visited Dr. Lawrence Beinnen for an examination. Beinnen's findings were startling—Takeda has bone structures, glands, and vessels which no normal human possesses. Beinnen mentioned his old partner, who seemed to have some knowledge of such things: Cramer Orano, who has now fled to the harsh colony world Nihil.

Meanwhile, Brian Vass closes in on his prey, and Nathan Clane has hired a mysterious assassin named Lashiir to bring him Takeda's head...

#

Takeda sat in front of their room's broad window, staring out at the rain which poured down in thick gray waves. The colors

of the plasma signs seemed strangely muted, as if the whole world of Freesail had been leeches of its color—which might even be true. Everything on the planet seemed gray: clothes, people, buildings, water.

Zartsi slept softly on the other bed, away from the window, curled into a ball on top of his cloak. His rifle was a few centimeters from one hand, and he wore his daggers even in sleep. His breathing was steady. Under other conditions, they might have been enough to lull Takeda into sleep.

But he couldn't stop running over what Beinnen had told him. The things the examination had revealed. He didn't know what else he had hoped for—maybe something to reassure him, rather than sink him into deeper worry. What was he? Not a normal human, according to Beinnen. He had organs no other human ever had. Was he a half-breed? Had his mother mated with a Drava? Takeda had heard that such things were possible.

Who was he? *What* was he? Takeda wished he could remember anything—his mother's face, some recollection of adolescence, anything. But he couldn't. Where he had grown up, lived, loved...it wasn't blank. It just wasn't there.

He sighed and slumped back on the bed. Sleep would help. He had never been a bad sleeper—never before. He could sleep tonight if he could find some way to calm his mind, if only for a few minutes. The pillow felt like it was made from sandpaper, and the mattress was hard, but they were better than nothing to his tired muscles. He stared up at the dark ceiling and tried to focus on the steady drum of the rain and Zartsi's sequence of inhalations and exhalations.

It was ironic. The one time he wanted to forget, he couldn't.

At last, after some time, the ambient noise around him helped to lull him into a groggy doze. He barely heard the noises coming from outside his window.

#

John and Thomas were the best of Lashiir's servants. He had trained them for years, teaching them the strength of silence and the edge of stealth, where to thrust a blade and aim a weapon. They were twin brothers, lean men with thick black hair, and they had never failed their Clordite master.

It had taken years of training to bring them to his standards, but Lashiir's investment of time had paid itself off many times over. He watched with pride as they moved to obey his orders, heedless of the rain soaking their clothing.

Each man had a grapnel in his hands as he crossed the street to the hotel and paused on the sidewalk below the target window. They were simple devices: powered claws attached to coils of a water-repelling cord. Their mechanism was equally simple. John and Thomas, moving nearly in unison, grasped the cord just below the claw end and began to spin it in a tight rotation. They gradually played out the cord, until Lashiir could hear the grapnels hiss faintly as they sliced the wet air.

Propelled grapnels would have been simpler, but they also made noise, and noise was something Lashiir couldn't afford on his hunts.

John released his first and Thomas followed soon after. The shining claws arced through the darkness to strike a few centimeters below the broad glass window on the third floor. They activated on contact. Claws dug into the concrete. John and Thomas leapt up onto their respective ropes, tugging, and the grapnels held. Lashiir knew both of them weighed slightly more than he did.

He fluted softly to them and gestured with his hands. He would cut the glass himself.

The twins acknowledged his order and sank down against the wall of the building. Lashiir tilted his head back to look at Roger

Clane. "I do as I am payed for, yes?" he asked, speaking through the translator implanted in his throat. "You will enter the room with me."

"Break the glass?"

Lashiir stepped forward and back-handed Roger before the young human could dodge. His rigid chitin tore skin on the young man's face.

Roger staggered back, raising a quavering hand to his face. He stared at the blood on his fingers. His eyes, transformed into dark whorls by contact lenses, widened slightly. "I'll kill you," he growled. "I don't care what my dad says!"

He started to reach for his gun—a nicely crafted pulser pistol. Lashiir simply wrapped his talons around Tsiika's grip and clacked his beak once, twice. "Let me tell you something, Roger Clane," he whispered, voice transformed into a monotone by his translator. "There are many ways to kill a human. Before you could fire a shot, I could slice your hamstrings and open the veins on your wrists. I would then have time to pull Tsiika up and down your flesh a hundred times before you bled to death."

Roger Clane dropped his hand. Lashiir could see his skin blanch even in the darkness. "You wouldn't kill me. I'm Nathan Clane's son. He'd burn you out of your hole."

"He told me so himself," Lashiir said. "But you would be dead."

He drew Tsiika just a couple centimeters from her scabbard, and soft music echoed in the damp air. "Are matters clear?"

Clane's hands shook. "Yes."

Lashiir released Tsiika, and she dropped back with another faint chime. "I will not kill you if you make me fail. I will only beat you to a bleeding lump and inform your father why I failed."

Clane nodded. "Just tell me what to do and finish it quick."

Lashiir reached into a pocket of his vest and withdrew two small cylinders. They were cold against his chitin, each with an activation

switch and a dial. "Do you know what these are?" he asked Clane.

The young man wiped away the blood trickling from his face with one sleeve. He shook his head. "Bombs?"

Lashiir shook his cowed head. "No. They are an ingenious device which has not yet become common among humans. I call them *kiiruk-sai*, you would call them...sonic knives? Good enough."

"What for?"

"For slicing through window glass without any noise within the hearing spectrum of humans, Lithrallians, Drava, or Vitai. This switch activates," he said, pushing it forward with one claw. A file-shaped blade, ten centimeters long, extended from the tube. "This dial adjusts vibration."

He rotated the knob halfway through a single revolution, and the blade began to quiver faintly—almost imperceptibly. Raindrops falling onto it became mist. It was completely silent. Lashiir rotated the dial further, and the blade became a blur, losing all its edges. It became a cylinder of mist in his hand.

Lashiir swung it at one side of the alleyway. The vibrating blade slashed away a chunk of concrete without making a sound. Clane nodded, eagerness showing in his eyes. "Crackin'," he said. "Could you...could you make a bigger one than that? A sword?"

Lashiir clacked his beak. "Questions, questions. These ones I will not answer. Time creeps."

He deactivated the sonic knife in his hand and tossed it to Clane, who caught it with bloody hands. For the present, he seemed to have forgotten his pain. Lashiir palmed the other one and turned back towards the hotel. His eyes followed the two ropes up to the dark glass of the window. Beyond it slept two beings, a human and a Lithrallian.

Neither of them would live for five minutes longer.

"I will report honestly to your father," Lashiir said, as he walked out into the street.

"You will not impress me. But you might do well enough to impress him."

#

Takeda couldn't tell if he was asleep or awake, dreaming or experiencing. He thought he could still see the ceiling of the hotel room above him, feel the mattress underneath and the blanket on top of him. But, although he felt that his posture was uncomfortable, he couldn't quite muster enough energy to roll over. Yes—he could hear Zartsi's breathing and the hiss of rainfall. He was dozing, but still awake.

But there was another sound. Faint, distant, perhaps part of some groggy dream. He mustered enough energy to roll onto his side, in the direction he thought the noise was coming from. He blinked sleepy eyes.

A patch of mist seemed to have settled on the window, a fuzzy gray color. No, two of them, moving...moving along the window. Was this another dream?

Takeda wasn't quite awake enough to care. He wanted to close his eyes and wait for sleep. He had to sleep eventually. Really sleep, and wake up rested in the morning.

But still, something in him felt a sense of danger—a sense of something coming for him, some threat...outside the window. Suddenly he could hear two hearts beating. A moment later, it was four—and one of them didn't sound like any he had heard before... it was two hearts, beating very close to each other.

He could also hear a high-pitched whine, faint at first, that grew more distinct as seconds ticked by. Then one of the mist patches vanished and a hole opened in the glass.

#

Lashiir let the panel of smooth glass—about half a centimeter thick—drop into his right hand as he gripped the rope with his feet. He handed it down to John as he supported himself with the other hand. He had sliced an opening in the glass just wide enough to

admit himself, taking into account the bulge Tsiika made on his back.

He reached up and latched his claws onto the windowsill, making sure he had a firm grip of the concrete before he took his feet away from the rope. He spared a moment to glance over at Clane, and saw that the young human had finished carving his entrance. The work was jagged, uneven, and excessive, but the glass dropped out smoothly, and he managed to pass it down to Thomas for removal without falling off the rope. He strained to support himself, however, and as Lashiir watched, he dropped the sonic knife. They were expensive and hard to find. That would cost Clane more of his blood.

But punishment would come later. Now was for death. Lashiir let go of the rope and supported himself only by his hands, locked onto the windowsill. He was strong, but the fall to the sidewalk would injure him severely if his hold slipped.

Lashiir pulled himself up, feeling the muscles beneath his chitin tighten. Water made his cloak heavy, but he was strong—he had spent years, his entire life, training his body for the hunt and the kill. He thrust his head forward, into the opening he had cut, and brought his legs up afterwards. It was a short drop to the floor. He rolled and came up in a crouch.

The first sound he noticed wasn't contented snoring, but rather the click of a round being chambered.

#

Takeda was wide awake by the time he saw two hands grip the windowsill. For a moment, he thought they were covered in black gloves, but his enhanced vision showed him otherwise. Those weren't human hands. The two hearts beat just below.

A dark shape came up behind the hands and rolled in through the opening in the window, too fast for Takeda to see more than a pair of dark eyes beneath a hood. He chambered a round and tensed his finger on the trigger. The black shape tensed for an instant. Takeda could hear its breath, its two hearts beating in unison, smell a faint odor of blood and

another he couldn't identify, faintly acrid.

The shape leapt, and in that instant, Takeda saw the face beneath the hood. Two eyes like blood rubies, larger than human ones, were set within ridges of deep gray exoskeleton, almost black. A beak hooked out just below them, gleaming faintly in the light from outside. It ended in a point.

The thing was like nothing Takeda had ever seen, even in his books.

He squeezed the trigger and rolled. Another sound accompanied the roar of his pistol shot—a high, piercing chime, musical and harsh at the same time. Takeda continued his roll and went over the foot of the bed. He landed in a crouch on the hard floor, fingers feeling subtle variations in the carpet's weave. He saw the thing on his bed, moving again, and fired another shot. It jerked a blade—a sword—out of his mattress and slid away from his fire in the same movement. Even his enhanced vision could barely track the thing's movements, blurred by the wet cloak it wore.

He fired again. "Zartsi!" he shouted into the darkness.

The beaked thing flew towards him and he heard the familiar sound of Zartsi's rifle cocking in the same instant. Takeda saw a flash of metal—the assassin did have a sword. Takeda rolled, snapping off another bullet as he did so. His mind told him, somehow, that it would hit.

But it didn't. The sword sank into the floor where his chest had been, and another piercing chime echoed through the small room. A sword on concrete. Takeda swung out with his foot and felt it connect with something solid, wrapped in thick cloth. Even his enhanced strength only moved the body a little.

There was another chime as the assassin wrenched his sword out of the carpet. Takeda threw himself into a backwards roll and came down at the foot of Zartsi's bed. The blade was already coming towards him—he could see nothing more than a gleaming sweep. It was too fast even for him. In that instant, Takeda saw his death.

The next instant, his death was gone. Two bars of white crossed just in front of his face, the assassin's sword caught between them. The echoes of the clash reverberated throughout the room.

Zartsi's daggers. Takeda could smell the Lithrallian crouched just above his head, hear his breath, all but feel his heart pounding. His eyes locked upon the sword stopped a few centimeters above his chest: Made from dark metal, not quite steel, broad and curved.

One more instant, and the scarlet light of a pulser beam filled the room. Takeda smelled burnt air and the sizzle of scorched concrete.

"Takeda! Out!" Zartsi hissed.

Then the assassin disengaged his sword and tackled Zartsi, flying over Takeda's head, in the same movement. Takeda heard the Lithrallian roar and a low, musical hiss from just above the twin hearts. He rolled to his feet. His second gun was still on the floor between the two beds. No time to get it. He could feel the weight of three magazines in his vest pockets.

Another pulser beam went past his head and scorched his rock-hard mattress before slicing through Zartsi's. The red light showed Takeda the second person who had entered the room. Takeda recognized him: Roger Clane, clad in the same black leather, his eyes black whorls. Takeda snapped his gun up as the barrel of the pulser shifted to aim at him. Clane was obviously terrified.

Takeda lined up a shot for Clane's forehead but hesitated for a moment. That moment was long enough for the blades behind him to clash together three times, but it didn't give Clane enough time to fire. Takeda's bullet split the padded shoulder of his jacket and shattered the bone beneath it. Clane screamed and released his pulser.

Takeda had seen enough death.

The musical rings of the assassin's sword continued, and Takeda heard Zartsi hiss angrily. He spun. The two—Zartsi wearing his leather armor even in sleep, the assassin still cowed in black—were struggling in the narrow space between Zartsi's bed and the

door. Blades moved in whirling flashes.

"Takeda!" Zartsi barked. "How get in?"

For an instant, the words didn't register in his mind—he stood mystified, despite the intense sensory input from all directions. Then the assassin's blade flashed in an arc too fast for Takeda's eyes to track, and the Lithrallian screamed as his blood sprayed out. He didn't let the pain distract him for an instant—if he had, that sword would have passed through his heart.

Get in. The assassins had gotten in somehow.

Takeda looked down into the rain. Two ropes were latched onto the side of the building, held onto the concrete by powered grapnels. Moisture gleamed on the smooth steel. Three stories down. Not too far.

"Ropes!" he shouted back.

Clane moaned, and Takeda snapped his head around. The man was halfway through the process of drawing a black revolver from a pocket in his jacket. Takeda shot it out of his hand without any conscious thought.

Zartsi broke into a roll across his bed, slammed his claws into the patch of floor between the mattresses, and bounded to Takeda's side. Takeda saw another rent in his armor—the assassin had slashed him across the back. He fired into the darkness, pulling the trigger on his pistol rapidly. The assassin wove around the bullets, but it gave Zartsi the moment he needed.

A moment to slide through the opening in the window and latch his claws around the rope.

For an instant, Takeda was alone with the assassin. And the being didn't pause for an instant, didn't say anything, didn't wait for Takeda to acknowledge him. In that moment, Takeda felt fear greater than any he had ever experienced. He could see the being's beak, catch a hint of his red eyes.

The assassin swept his arm in the air and Takeda ducked in time to dodge a hail of gleaming metal—throwing blades. Takeda

knew from their smell that they were poisoned, and a jolt of fear went through him. In his previous fights, his instincts had told him exactly what to do, how to exercise his abilities. Not now. If he remained in this room for a second longer, the assassin would kill him. The sword gleamed in the gray light.

He gripped the windowsill with his hands, crouched down, and threw himself into the night, sliding through the hole Roger Clane had cut. Rainwater pattered onto his face and wind buffeted him as his legs followed his head out. He reached out his hand, felt it seize a narrow cord, and jerked to a stop. His muscles were strong enough to support him. Rain lashed down on him—he didn't have a coat to cover himself.

He heard the assassin coming, heard the two hearts beating like drums. Takeda knew that the being wouldn't hesitate to follow him out the window. He had an instant. The cord felt sticky. He released it just enough to allow gravity to pull him down, letting it slide between his fingers. Air rushed around him, and he heard a silenced shot split the night air and ricochet off concrete. The sensations were overwhelming. He couldn't think—if he did, he would die. He could only act on instinct.

Takeda saw the sidewalk rushing to meet him and clamped his fingers down on the rope again. It slid in his grip, sawing skin off his fingers. Then he hit the concrete, hard enough to send barbs of pain into his feet and up the bones of his legs. He grunted.

The barrel of a gun stuck out of the rain three feet away from him. The bulk of a silencer made the barrel look centimeters wider than it was. Takeda bent back just below a volley of bullets. He swung his gun around to fire, snapped a bullet into the rain, heard it shatter bone and shred flesh. The man didn't make a sound. Another silenced bullet hissed past Takeda's ear as he ducked down and shot his hand out where the man's midsection would be. He felt power surge inside him—uncontrollable power that seemed to come out of his very flesh. Blue energy like summer lightning exploded out of his fingertips. The man screamed as the smells of cooked flesh and cloth filled Takeda's nostrils.

Then he was in the street, feet splashing in churning puddles as his boots pounded concrete. He wove an irregular path, kicking off the slick ground, and felt another throwing blade slice his vest. For an instant, he wondered how his strange body would cope with poison.

He didn't have the leisure to wonder. The twin hearts were on the ground already. The assassin had slid down the ropes like a spider and was running in pursuit. Without turning, Takeda could imagine the gleaming sword in his hand, see the beak, curved like a gutting hook, and the gleaming red eyes above it, locked in a shell of black armor.

He hit the sidewalk and ran. Even the bars were closed at this time of night. Takeda was surrounded by nothing but water, mist, and shadows, with an occasional plasma sign glimmering through all of it.

Takeda knew that even if anyone were out on the streets, they would only die. He thought about turning, fighting the assassin face to face, but he didn't know if he could do it. The being had been so fast...almost faster than Takeda. Zartsi had been losing his brief encounter.

Zartsi. Takeda realized that he had lost track of the Lithrallian—he didn't know if Zartsi had even reached the ground alive. Maybe the assassin's henchmen had shot him. Maybe one of those throwing blades had pierced Zartsi's armor and he was vomiting blood onto the pavement at this moment. Takeda hesitated, bringing himself to a stop. His shoes slid on the slick sidewalk.

The two hearts were close. Takeda turned—slowly, deliberately—to see a dark shape in the mist and rain, standing just a dozen feet away. His enhanced vision allowed him to see the assassin's beak. The being gripped his sword in his right talon and rested the flat of the blade on his left, almost tenderly.

"Tell me, human," the assassin said. His voice came in a gravelly monotone, unlike anything Takeda had heard. "What is your name?"

Takeda dropped the magazine out of his

pistol and slapped in a fresh one. "Who are you?"

"Your name first."

"Takeda Croster."

"Then I am Lashiir. Thank you, Takeda Croster—I prefer to know the name of every man I send to Darkness."

The sword slowly came up from his left palm and moved in a gleaming arc. The rain seemed to curve around it, and the blade gleamed with a light that darkened everything around it.

"You are powerful," Lashiir said, coming a step closer. "Otherwise, you would not be alive. John is injured—not irreparably, but it will take many days and a great deal of suffering for him to be useful to me again. Roger Clane is injured as well, but that does not surprise me so much."

Lashiir stepped closer again. Takeda tightened his hold on the trigger. His only other weapon was his knife—everything else was still at the room.

"When the Darkness embraces you and whispers her song to you, tell my name to her. She will know it," Lashiir said. This time, there was a hint of a high, fluting sound accompanying his voice.

Takeda backstepped. "Who are you?"

"I told you my name. Roger Clane's presence should tell you more—you know him. But I have talked enough."

Lashiir charged and the sword flashed. Takeda fired, allowing instinct to guide his aim, but his bullets spanged harmlessly off concrete. He leapt backwards. The sword blade split the fabric of his shirt. The blade missed his flesh, but chimed faintly nonetheless.

"The Darkness will also know what discipline gives you such speed," Lashiir said.

He tapped the blade three times with his claws, making a different sound every time. The sword was a curved scimitar, the tip broader and heavier than the base. He could

faintly see a pattern of lines etched into its surface.

Takeda could barely see the blade as it came up in a swipe at his neck. He had no time to dodge—he could only blindly swing up one of his arms, hoping that the bone would somehow keep the sword away from his spine for a moment longer.

He felt racing pain in his arm and heard a high, resonating chime. The blade had to be buried in his arm—his eyes turned towards it.

The cloth of his shirt had been sliced away by a blade bursting out of his forearm. It was curved, a little less than a foot long, colored a color between bone and stainless steel—and it had stopped Lashiir's sword. The scimitar had taken no more than a nick out of it. There was no blood.

Takeda jumped back. Lashiir's sword rang again as the curved bone edge scraped against it. "What are you, Croster?" the assassin said. No emotion entered his voice. "Human bionics aren't advanced enough for such a mechanism."

"I don't know," Takeda gasped, staring at the thing protruding from his flesh.

Suddenly, he realized that he could hear an engine snarling in the rain, hear its wheels squealing on soaked pavement. The cry of "Takeda!" reached his ears a moment later.

He ran out into the street, away from the hooded assassin. Lashiir paused for a moment, but there was no fear in his carriage. Then Takeda heard his two hearts move in pursuit.

Bullets cracked and slammed against the side of the building, shattering a pane of glass. Lashiir dodged expertly. His body dropped onto all fours, and rolled, taking the sword with him. He was on his feet again in a little over a second—but that was too long. Takeda reached the center of the street in time to intercept the bike.

Zartsi was crouched low against the handlebars of the motorcycle, rainwater pouring off his reddish-brown armor. His daggers were sheathed at his sides and he clutched his

sawed-off pistol in his right hand. He snapped another pair of shots at Lashiir, decelerating the bike to about ten miles an hour. "Get on!" he shouted.

Takeda didn't hesitate. He straddled the padded seat behind Zartsi and locked his arms around the Lithrallian's waist. He could feel the muscles there. The Lithrallian still had his rifle, strapped across his shoulders, and Takeda's cheek pressed against it.

A final poisoned throwing blade came out of the rain as Zartsi twisted the accelerator and sparked the bike's engine into roaring life, but to Takeda, the throw seemed half-hearted.

He noticed that the blade had retracted into his arm, leaving nothing but a wrinkled patch on his skin.

#

It had taken Brian Vass fifteen minutes with the Freesail police, followed by a two hour wait in a tiny room decorated only by water stains, to decide that he would have to rely on his own ingenuity to find and capture Croster.

That was why the morning of the next day found him in a seedy tavern located deep in the city's spacer district, with two of his Greendome force seated at the table with him. Vass had left his uniform behind, going instead for an ash-gray suit that gave him the right aura of dignity and power. His pulser remained in its customary holster on his leg as he finished a mug of the tavern's watery beer.

Vass tapped his pale fingers on the tabletop and stared into the milky yellow eyes of the Drava seated across from him. Chuchis, he was called. A bright red comb held back his pale hair.

"You said you had information?" Vass asked.

"I did and I do," the Drava said, with a

strong accent that softened all his consonants. Imperish wasn't his first language.

Vass languidly flipped a ten-Silver coin, letting it sparkle in the harsh white lights of the tavern. The Drava's eyes widened, and Vass sighed. This game was childishly easy. He had played it many times before even in his relatively small district on Belar. "I'll pay well," he said.

The Drava extended one hand. Vass flicked the coin into it with his thumb. Chuchis pocketed it, and said, "All right. Word is that the man you describe and a Lithrallian pounded Roger Clane and a few of his friends, then got away before the police arrived."

Vass frowned. "Where are they now?"

Chuchis sucked in on his lips. Vass glared at the Drava until he said, somewhat reluctantly, "I don't know. But I do know one more thing. A man I know in the Clane gang said Nathan Clane had gone out alone, to a certain part of the city, and there's only one time when he does that. When he's hiring Lashiir. Honestly, both the beings you're looking for are probably already dead."

Vass suppressed the surge of anger he felt. He wanted to kill Croster with his own hands. "Lashiir?"

"Best assassin on the planet."

"I see," Vass said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out another ten Silvers. Chuchis seemed hesitant to discuss this killer—he needed encouragement. "Has Lashiir tracked him down yet?"

Chuchis glanced between Vass' face and the coin a few times, then he said, "Look, I know you have money, but Lashiir has contacts everywhere, and if I tell you much, I'll probably be gutted by this time tomorrow."

Vass clenched his teeth. The temptation to take this interrogation into an alleyway was growing, but he decided that it would be imprudent. He tossed Chuchis another coin. "No one's listening."

The Drava glanced around nervously. They were indeed in a far corner of the tavern, several feet away from any other patron, and both of them had kept their voices just above a whisper. Chuchis shuddered, pocketed the coin, and said, "He doesn't usually bother with small guys like me. Thing is, if Lashiir's on the job, I suggest you run. Far. He kills whoever he likes—that's why Clane hires him."

"I know for a fact that this target will be challenging."

"Lashiir's never challenged. You listen—he killed Hugh Hammer a few years back, when Clane was taking things over. And Hammer was holed up with a dozen of his best guns."

Vass sighed and reached for another ten-Silver piece. His anger was building with every second this conversation proceeded. He hadn't come across light years of empty space just to clean up Croster's bloody remains. That would be no more than a footnote to his career, rather than the glorious capture he needed.

But it was still possible that he could take credit for someone else's work. Then, he would only miss the joy of burning down Croster and his Lithrallian pet in person. Better to take what he could get than go back to Greendome with nothing to show for his efforts.

"Do you know where I can find Nathan Clane?"

Chuchis hesitated for only a moment. "I know who can get you a meeting with him."

Vass tossed him a third coin which was pocketed just as quickly. "Good. I want to talk to him in person. Maybe he'll sell me Croster's head, or at least some chunk of him which verifies the death."

One of the men sitting at his side sucked in his breath and started to say something, but a glare from Vass was enough to silence him. They were technically police officers, loosely affiliated with the Imperial Government, but in practice, they would do whatever he ordered.

Even if he ordered them to enter negotia-

tions with a crime lord.

#

Takeda's eyes snapped open and he gasped. Sweat glued his clothes and skin together, and his heart throbbed. His back rested against the brick wall of an alleyway, and he could smell garbage in the canisters around him. But the stench of sulfur and the oppressive, dry heat of his dream were gone.

He had seen her again, the woman with eyes like stars and hair like a sweep of black silk. She had talked to him, repeating his name over and over. Blood and tears had mingled on her cheeks. He didn't know her name or who she was. But, somehow, he *knew* her.

Then he had seen blades and saws hovering above him beneath a stark, white sun before everything had dissolved into fire and ash. The eyes had been there, too—blank yellow eyes with pupils like pinholes in their centers. Watching him. Seeking him.

He pulled himself up straighter and groaned. His whole body ached and his clothes were damp.

Takeda couldn't complain, though. He and Zartsi were lucky to be alive after last night.

The Lithrallian woke a few minutes later. "Good morning, Takeda."

Takeda just grunted, locked gazes with Zartsi for a moment, and stared between his feet. "Where did you get that motorcycle last night?"

"I cut lock and started engine with hands. I have practiced."

Takeda nodded, and Zartsi asked, "You question need to steal, Takeda? If not, you would be dead."

"I know," Takeda said. "I'm not going to complain this time."

"Good," Zartsi answered. "I am wounded twice—not condition for argument."

Takeda noticed that Zartsi had knotted filthy rags over the slash on his back and the

rent on his shoulder blade. Blood stained the cloth.

"Are you...are you badly hurt?"

"No. Back wound shallow, shoulder cut small. Will not inhibit too much."

"Good. Next question: do you think it would be safe to go back to the hotel room?"

Zartsi grunted and rubbed his neck with one hand. "Why?"

"I left my other gun back there. If that assassin stays on us, I'm going to need to it."

All the humor vanished from Zartsi's face. "Takeda, another pistol will not help against him."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Takeda, I was master with bone knives when on Lithrall. But Clordite wounded me twice—my blades didn't come close to his flesh. More time, and I would be dead."

Takeda tapped his fingers on the concrete. He felt drained, and the events of the night felt like just another nightmare. "Clordite?"

"You don't know them?"

"I've never heard that word before."

Zartsi smiled humorlessly. "But you did notice that assassin not human, Vitai, Lithrallian, or Drava?"

"Of course. It would have been hard not to."

Zartsi nodded. "He was Clordite."

Several seconds passed before Zartsi offered any more information. "Your Empire fought with them," Zartsi said. "Thirty years ago, during reign of Eichiro II."

"I've...never heard anything about that. But I've only had three years to learn."

Zartsi shook his head. "Imperial Administration may have covered up—would not be surprised. But in Kingdom, Serpent King does not hide things from his people. Many Lithrallians know of Clordites."

Takeda checked the magazine on his pistol. "I'm listening."

"There was human colony world called Sashenkaburg, located on galactic north border—near galactic eastern border of Lithrallian Kingdom. Small population, mostly logged timber for markets in Jackson Province. No large settlements, but space beyond Sashenkaburg has never been explored well by either human or Lithrallian, so small defense fleet was maintained. Partly to protect from *Kingdom pirates*."

Zartsi said that last sentence with an unmistakable anger, hissing the last two words out. He glared down at the stained concrete for a moment, then flicked his eyes back up and continued.

"July 15th, your year Eichiro II 9, Legion garrison on neighboring planet Shidaka received emergency call from Sashenkaburg garrison. Were under attack from unclassified ships. Shidaka commander sent reinforcements to system, and they found small fleet of ships unlike others known, using advanced laser technology and other weapons systems not understood. Humans fought, but there was standstill, and Empire entered negotiations with ships. Those were Clordites. Fierce warriors, unable to speak human language without machine, cold and cruel. Some settlement was reached—I don't know terms, but involved complete abandonment of Sashenkaburg. Human and Lithrallian boundaries end at neighboring systems, and exploratory missions from both have never returned from space beyond."

Takeda chewed his lip in silence for a few moments. He had never heard of the incident. "What was one doing in our room, then?"

"I've heard rumors of few in Imperial space, and there was once pair caught in City of Silver Water for murder, theft, mutilation."

"Mutilation?"

"Details are not necessary."

Zartsi stood up, wincing visibly as he did. "Come, Takeda. If we talk, there are better places than alleyway."

Takeda stood. He ached himself, and his hands stung from gripping the assassin's rope. His mind felt vaguely fuzzy, and images from his nightmare lingered. "Could you spare money for some coffee?"

"Yes, Takeda. We can sell motorcycle for more."

Takeda frowned. "The one you stole?"

"Takeda, would be no way to return it without attention from Freesail police. You might pass, but Lithrallian would not—too few of us for me to blend in."

Takeda sighed. "Sure, after all we've done, what's one more theft?"

"Not way I think of it, Takeda. Our lives are worth more than property."

He shook his head. If he argued with Zartsi, he knew he would lose. The Lithrallian still had all the money, for one thing. And, with this assassin—this Clordite—hunting for him, Takeda didn't want to separate from his only... what was Zartsi? A friend? An ally? A partner in crime? Takeda couldn't be sure.

But, once again, the Lithrallian hunter had saved Takeda's life. He could have fled on the motorcycle and left Takeda as a convenient way to stall the assassin. Takeda also realized that he had been over all this before, had brooded over everything Zartsi had said and done, but the Lithrallian had yet to betray his trust.

"All right," Takeda said. "We'll sell the bike. But there's just one thing."

"Yes?"

"You remember what Beinnen said? About his partner?"

"Yes. I was listening to conversation."

Takeda nodded, staring down at the floor of the alleyway. "Cramer Orano is on Nihil now. If there's any chance he knows...he knows why my bones and my guts are scrambled up like this...I have to go to Nihil."

"Nihil...." Zartsi hissed, his scaled face creasing in a frown. "You know planet,

Takeda?"

"I was reading about it before I left the casino in Greendome."

"Then you know more than I do," Zartsi said. "But I have heard of things, flaying winds, boiling tar, scorching day and freezing night."

"All that and more," Takeda whispered, nodding. "Grit crabs, Walking Evils, dust snakes."

Zartsi crouched down in front of him. "Takeda," he said, "he may be dead. He may know nothing."

"I know that. But I have to go. I don't care if I die...I just have to know. Know what the hell is wrong with my body. And my mind."

He tapped his forehead and only realized how pathetic the gesture was a moment later. Zartsi shook his head back and forth slowly, running one hand over his headridges. "You are determined."

"Yeah," Takeda said. "Honestly, I don't care if you take the money and run. See this?" He pointed to the opening in his sleeve. The only wound was a pale pink scar. "A blade came out of my arm. I don't know how. I'm going to Nihil."

"Then I will come, if you will have me."

Zartsi's expression was serious—Takeda couldn't see anything that looked like mockery in it. His hands gripped the hafts of the ivory daggers sheathed at his sides.

"Why?"

"I have told you. Your life is dangerous, Takeda. There is Clordite who wants your death—we were lucky for one escape, together. Alone, you would die in instant."

"I didn't do so badly."

"He held back—didn't know your strength. Next time he will not."

Takeda rubbed his beard again, which had been growing since that last night in the Silver Sun Casino. "How do you know so much about his race?"

"I have stood before throne of Serpent King, Takeda, and visited libraries in City of Golden Ascension. We have knowledge which only lords in your Empire possess. More. I would swear my tongue that King knows more of darkness beyond Sashenkaburg than Emperor."

Zartsi bowed his head for a moment, his hands gripping his daggers all the tighter. When he looked up again his blue eyes burned. "Takeda, I began to help you because you needed. I continue to help also because of Clordite. He will come. I will kill."

Takeda knew that it would be useless to ask questions—Zartsi had already told him a great deal more than he could have expected.

"All right," he said. "Now let's find a ship."

#

Takeda had already seen Freesail's official port—the *Brass Shield* had let them off there, and he had crossed hundreds of meters of rain-slicked asphalt before reaching the first buildings of the city.

But Zartsi knew of another port. After buying Takeda a new suit of clothes and a spare case of bullets, they set out along the city's extensive sidewalks. Takeda barely noticed the other pedestrians and the vehicles navigating along the streets. He saw blades and gun barrels shining in every alleyway, and every dark window hid a hooked beak and eyes the color of raw meat. He kept his hand near his gun barrel and his ears alert for the sound of two hearts beating side-by-side. They walked for over an hour, until the sun had almost reached its peak in a sky striped with gray and white.

Then, suddenly, they turned a corner past a smoking factory and faced a chain link fence. Beyond that was a stretch of open ground—the first unpaved dirt Takeda had seen on Freedan. It was a musty, reddish-brown color, still damp from last night's rain. The area was probably four hundred meters on a side, with more industrial buildings visible on the opposite side.

The place was a motley bazaar of rusty,

crudely painted ships splashed with drying mud. Many of them had flimsy-looking stands erected against their sides, and Takeda could see exotic items dangling from hooks and spread across their tables: Fruits, jewelry, colorful scarves, carved pipes, and other small items. Humans and Drava moved among the tables, many of them nicely dressed.

"What is this place?" Takeda asked.

"Many cities have one. Some beings live roaming life, but not registered with Imperial Commerce Office, so can't set down in official port. This is place for them to put down their ships before next move."

Zartsi led him on through the gates. "A marketplace?"

"Helps to buy food and fuel," he said. "They buy trinkets one place, sell them in another. Money is valuable to them—passage should be cheap."

Takeda frowned. The wet ground squished beneath his shoes as he passed by a pair of old Drava camped outside a ship that looked like two shipping crates welded together. They sold an impressive spread of necklaces made from beads which, on closer examination, turned out to be tiny animal skulls coated with colored glaze. "Ten Silvers!" one of them croaked. "A ten Silver coin will buy your woman's love forever."

Takeda kept walking. An image of Sheri—the waitress from the casino—flashed in his head, her hair pulled back into a loose braid and a smile stretching between her cheeks, but he shook it away. He would probably never see her again.

"Idea is to find ship which looks like will survive next lift-off," Zartsi hissed. "And can also be bought for a hundred and fifty Silvers. Two hundred at most."

"Will that be enough?"

"One can hope."

Takeda sighed, glanced at one vendor hawking black plants that writhed slowly in their pots. "Maybe we should just catch a lift to the next city. Then the next one. We could

find work, earn some money, and then go to Nihil."

Zartsi shook his head emphatically. "There is Clordite pursuing you, Takeda. He will not stop because you move few miles. I am doubtful he will stop even between planets."

"You think he would follow us to Nihil?"

"I do not think he would leave prey alive."

A man stood up from where he had been crouching, hands, shoved into the pockets of his dark leather jacket, and called out, "Ahoy, you two! Step over here a moment."

Takeda turned to face him a second ahead of Zartsi. For a couple seconds he could see tiny flecks of dirt embedded in the man's fingers and smell the bits of meat stuck in his teeth. Then his senses faded—this man was no threat, just an old spacer with a battered captain's hat cocked over one ear.

"You look like you're shopping for more than glitz," he said, winking. "Want a fare? I can see you do. Have a look at the *Gray Queen*."

The ship beyond him was ten meters from nose to engine bank, with a coat of paint that was probably only a couple years old. The ship's name was stenciled on its side in gold letters.

"She's cozy," he said, "but you'd both be comfortable. Cheap fares, too—I just want enough to keep her in the air."

Zartsi moved closer, and Takeda followed his lead. He had to admit that the Lithrallian probably knew more about starships than he ever would.

"How many crew?" Zartsi hissed.

"Just me, my engineer, and a guy who...well, let's just say he's good with his fists and helps us pull in a little more cash. They're drinking. Left me to man the damn shop."

He waved at low table on the ground in front of him which contained an array of knives and metal knuckles. Most of them looked handmade. "I'd try to sell you some, but you look like you've got some nice blades

already," he said, looking at Zartsi's daggers.

Zartsi studied the ship carefully. "I will need look at engines."

"Once I see you've got the money, sure."

"How much?"

The old captain smiled. "Depends where you're heading."

"Colony world—Nihil."

The captain's expression froze. "'Scuse me, mate, but you have an accent, and I'm not sure I heard you right."

Takeda felt a knot tighten in his gut while Zartsi smiled coldly. "You heard correctly."

The captain exhaled slowly, and took his hat off to reveal a head of silver-gray hair, faintly curled. "Look, not only is that a damn long voyage—farthest colony, way out past Belar—but there's nothing there except sand, monsters, and a crew of men too nasty to live any place else. You've have to plate the *Queen* in gold and fill her up with rubies to get me there."

He put his hat back on and pulled it down tight. One eye squinted beneath it. "Look, I don't ask much. I'd be willing to take you to any other within twenty-light years. I'll even take a run to Belar or Chi-Su for you. But I'm sure as hell not going anywhere near Hot Nothing."

The captain sat back down and rested one arm on his table, rattling its contents. "Come back when you're interested in something rational."

Zartsi turned away without another word. Takeda stared down at the captain's worn hat for a moment or two longer, and followed his friend.

"No bank robberies or anything," he said. "If we need more money we'll work for it."

"You did not hear me suggest other, Takeda," Zartsi hissed back. "But is more than one ship."

They found two more relatively intact craft

and asked the captains for passage to Nihil. One of them just mumbled an obscenity under his breath and turned away, even after Zartsi started juggling three ten-Silver coins in front of him.

Takeda slumped against the fence, feeling the links through the fabric of his new shirt and vest. He sighed. "Zartsi, this might be possible if we had a case of hundred-Silver coins the size of an aircar, but you're not going to get a ship to Nihil on two hundred Silvers or whatever it is you have."

"About 233," Zartsi said, unslinging his rifle and leaning on the barrel. "Thirty-three is food reserve."

"Two hundred Silvers for a ship to Nihil. Is that even enough to pay for fuel?"

"It should just cover it."

"In theory," Takeda growled.

They stood for a minute or two, listening to the ongoing business of the marketplace and the dull noises of Freesail's factory complexes. Takeda wondered how long it would take the Clordite to find them again, and how in the stars he was going to survive the next time.

"Excuse me, gents," a throaty voice called, "but you're scanning ships?"

Takeda looked towards the voice, then looked down. The speaker's head came up to the middle of his ribcage. It was also unlike anything he had ever seen in reality: a massive nose with nostrils he could have stuck his fist into dominated the face's geography, with gleaming black eyes set far apart above and a narrow, puckered mouth below. The thing's skin was a leathery, deep red with patches of darker fur. Rings made from gold, silver, copper, and other metals filled its pointed ears.

Takeda nearly fled before he realized what it was: a Vitai.

"Stars bless your course, Rover," Zartsi said.

"And the Sun shine on yours," the Vitai answered, its voice a deep croak. It shook

its head and Takeda saw the beaded knots of dark fur that dangled from the back of its skull. Flaps of translucent skin stretched from its chest to its wrists, forming wings that bent and fluttered every time the being moved its arms. It stretched its seven-fingered hands, presenting them palm-up. Bracelets rattled.

"I am Esheera Nii, a Rover, the daughter of Eshmauk and Raidi. My boat is the *Ixlu Seer*."

"Zartsi of the Kingdom," the Lithrallian said, bowing. His piercing blue eyes rolled towards Takeda.

He nodded. "Takeda Croster."

She stuck out a needle-pointed tongue and licked her nostril. "Takeda? You Japanese?"

"I...I don't think so. I don't know."

"You don't look like it, and the Croster doesn't match. Don't sweat. You humans have got your names all jumbled anyway."

She cocked her head at Zartsi. "No clutch name for Esh?"

Zartsi showed his pointed teeth in a scowl. "No."

"Everyone's got his secrets," Esheera croaked, stretching her mouth in something that might have been a smile. "I'll tell you one of mine: I switched a human's wine for some Rover booze three days ago. Puked after one shot." She laughed harshly. "You want to see the *Seer*?"

"You should hear destination first," Zartsi hissed. "We wish voyage to human colony world Nihil."

"No need to specify human, dear. Everything around here's human. Or Drava, which is worse. You know how Drava piss smells?"

The Vitai's Imperish was fluent—more fluent than Zartsi's. Despite her accent Takeda had no trouble understanding her. But he wondered if Esheera could understand it as well as she could rattle it off.

"Do you know what Nihil is?" Takeda asked, frowning.

"Colony world. You said so yourself. One major settlement, several outlying mining camps."

"Do you have any idea what it's like?"

"Tourist revenues low, raw iron revenues high. I have some idea."

Takeda smiled grimly. "And that doesn't bother you?"

Esheera flicked out her tongue again. "Look, Croster, you take me wrong. You see all these beings?"

She waved one arm at the port around them. Takeda nodded. She continued, "Among them is only one Rover. Me. They run a circuit between a few planets, live a lazy life, and have no purpose. They wish only to maintain a poor independence. I am not one of them."

She spread both her arms, stretching her wings taut. Her bracelets jangled. "I am a Vitai, of the Star-chosen, of a great people who live without a world. We roam because the stars are in our soul, not because we lack the drive for any employment. The beauty of the universe is ours."

Her brought her arms back down and crossed them over the woven sweater that covered her chest. "Which is a fancy way of saying that I'm no coward and I like to go places other people don't. How much money you got?"

"Two hundred Silvers," Takeda said, cutting Zartsi off.

"Good enough as far as cash goes. But there's another price," Esheera said, shaking her head so that her earrings and necklaces rattled.

"What's that?"

"I told you I roam because it's my destiny, not because I don't have any place better to plant my butt. I like to see worlds, but I also like to hear about the people who live on them—I like to hear stories. So here's what I want from you two: if you agree to travel on the *Seer*, you also agree to tell me your stories, no lies, when I ask for them. I don't

want to know every dirty little thing you did when you were young and stupid or anything. But I want your story as well as you can tell it."

She shrugged. "That's a Rover's price. And I'm not taking any passengers who aren't willing to pay it."

Takeda's gut twisted. What could he tell he tell her? Three years of casino stories followed by the weeks of insanity that had swallowed whatever life he had possessed? The Vitai were the drifters of the galaxy, their homeworld a scorched ruin, and the Imperial Government didn't look on them with favor, but Takeda couldn't rule out the possibility that she would turn him over to the police.

He heard a hiss from his side and turned to see Zartsi glaring at the Vitai with widened eyes and bared fangs. "Your price is high, Rover," he growled.

"Right. You'd have to tell me your clutch name, for one thing. And how you ended up traveling to Nihil with a human gunslinger."

"What if I don't?"

"Then I don't take your fare. Or I take your human friend and leave you kissing dirt."

She licked her nostrils again. "If it makes you feel better, I would reciprocate. I wouldn't make you spill your heart without doing the same."

Zartsi clenched his hands. "Does 'story' need to encompass entire life?"

"Why? You got some stupid things from your youth? No need to go into all the details."

Zartsi's eyes dropped to the mud. "I have things which I tell none. Not Rover, not Takeda, not anyone."

"So I gather," she said. "Well, tough luck. Find another ship. You, Takeda—you want to come without him?"

Takeda started to think it over, and realized that Zartsi still had the money. He couldn't go anywhere without the Lithrallian's purse.

He sighed angrily and glanced around,

looking at the other ships in the port. Would any of them take the fare? Somehow he doubted it. Esheera talked as if she were the only Vitai here, and none of the human captains had even entertained the idea.

Then he noticed a being staring at him from the shade of a starship's curved wing: a pale-faced human clad in loose black clothing. Another memory came back to him of a man with a silenced pistol, firing at Takeda at close range in the driving rain. As Takeda felt his vision focus and become sharper, he saw beneath this man's hood. It was either the same gunman or his twin.

The man noticed he had been spotted, and a moment later he was gone, vanished into the bustle of the market.

"Zartsi," he said. "One of the Clordite's men."

The Lithrallian spun, nostrils flaring. "You're certain?"

"Yes. He's gone now, but it was him."

"Then his master isn't far."

Zartsi's eyes narrowed for several seconds. He seemed to be staring at nothing, and his nostrils flared even wider. Takeda saw that his tail was slowly curling and uncurling, turning knots in the warm air.

"Rover," Zartsi hissed. "I have no choice. When will ship be ready to leave?"

"One hour if I rush things. I've still got a few bolts to tighten before I'd trust the Seer in the air, much less in the black."

"Do it," Zartsi hissed. "Now."

He reached for his purse and counted out exactly thirty-three Silvers. Then he tossed the purse to Esheera. "Two hundred Silvers," he said. "And I accept other price."

Esheera caught it neatly and stuffed it into one of her broad pockets without bothering to count. "Deal," she said. "Be back here in one hour."

"I don't think we'll be going far," Takeda said, staring at the crowd.

The knot in his gut tightened again. He knew it wouldn't take an hour for the Clordite to come. And when he caught up with them, Takeda doubted he would stay alive for more than a handful of minutes.

Zartsi sighed. "Come, Takeda. We should arrange alternate pick-up point."

"What?"

"If we remain here, we'll die. If we can make Rover meet us elsewhere, and prepare ship while we run there, perhaps we can survive to see Nihil."

Next month...Chapter 7: Powers of Darkness



SEAN T.M. STIENNON

*Sean is an author of fantasy and science fiction novels and short stories with many publications under his belt. His first short story collection, **Six with Flinteye**, was recently released from Silver Lake Publishing, and he won 2nd place in both the 2004 SFReader.com Short Story Contest and the Storn Cook Razor-Edged Fiction Contest with his stories "Asp" and "The Sultan's Well," respectively. "The Sultan's Well" has been published in the anthology **Sages and Swords**. Sean's short story "Flinteye's Duel" was published in **Ray Gun Revival**, Issue 01.*

*Sean's work tends to contain lots of action and adventure, but he often includes elements of tragedy and loss alongside roaring battles. A lot of his work centers around continuing characters, the most prominent of whom is Jalazar Flinteye (**Six with Flinteye**). He also writes tales of Shabak of Talon Point ("Death Marks," in issue #9 of **Amazing Journeys Magazine**), **Blademaster** ("Asp," 2nd place winner in the 2004 SFReader.com Contest), and others who have yet to see publication.*

*Sean loves to read fantasy and science fiction alongside some history, mysteries, and historical novels. His favorites include **Declare** by Tim Powers, the **Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn** trilogy by Tad Williams, Stephen Lawhead's **Song of Albion** trilogy, and **King Solomon's Mines** by H. Rider Haggard. He has reviewed books for **Deep Magic: The E-zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction**, and currently reviews books at **SFReader.com**.*

To contact the author, send an e-mail to flinteye@gmail.com. The author is always happy to receive reader feedback.

The Jolly RGR

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