

RAYGUN REVIVAL



ISSUE 27

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Ray Gun Revival

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Issue 27, August 01, 2007

Overlords' Lair

Preamble, and the Missing Overlord, Part I

Welcome to Ray Gun Revival magazine, Issue 27. I've got the command deck to myself this issue as Overlord Loriendil is off on her annual ritual of self destruction and renewal out of the events of the past year. Some people call that a 'vacation,' rising, phoenix-like, out of one's own ashes. I call that 'work.' She'll be back in time for Issue 28. She may have to vaporize twice as many planets there for awhile on her return, but I think she's up to the task, and we'll be back on a regular schedule before you can scream, 'Wait, please, I see the error of my...' bzzzzt.

Space Monkey Flash Fiction Contest Update

So let's dive directly into the business at hand. The deadline for the flash fiction contest is technically at hand. If you have a masterpiece you've been crafting, now's the time to sneak it in before Lee returns and starts asking "So what's all this, then?"

The Missing Overlord, Part II

We've gotten an communication from Overlord Firefellow. Paul has escaped his kidnappers and is making his way back from a very distant galaxy. His ansible is spotty at best, but from what I can understand, he's continuing

development of JASPER SQUAD chapters and will send them along when he can. He's been working on outlines and making inroads on writing the next chapter. No promises, but we haven't heard the last from Captain Spill, the mercenary Stamp, and the rest of the crew.

Publishing Opportunities at RGR

As always, if you have a hankering to try your hand at space opera or golden age sci-fi, our slushpile is thin enough that you may have a better chance now than if you waited for awhile. And feel free to tell your writer friends about us. We might be a fine way to pad the writing resume a little.

We Have a Theme?

The stories for this issue have a loose theme of 'belonging.' (I wish I could take credit for that but it just worked out that way.)

Elbow Room, by M. Lawrence Key

Ibrahim Khouri's family blasted off for far-flung worlds to escape conditions on Earth, but kept discovering that the things they'd left behind were waiting for them when they awoke out of cryo sleep. What would they have to do to find some space to breathe, some simple elbow room?

"Unidentified ship, please respond," came a voice from the 'com. "I repeat, this is Safehaven Colony Control. Please identify yourselves."

Father and I whirled around and looked at each other and then at the speaker panel. Father's face drained of its high color. Behind us, we could hear the clattering of the flight crew members racing up the ladder to the flight deck. One of them finally keyed the transceiver.

"This is the Nijmeh, registration CZ145836," he said. "Who am I speaking to?" Incredulity thickened his voice so that he could barely get the words out.

"Safehaven Colony Control," came the reply. "What is your destination, Nijmeh? We don't show your registration number anywhere. Hold while I check..." The voice trailed off for a second, then: "Oh, God."

Tulip, A Jack Brand story, by John M. Whalen

The next story is a cracking good adventure yarn about the flip side of belonging, being consumed by one's demons. Jack Brand is the last one you might think of to administer an intervention, but that's hardly his fault.

Jack Brand does a favor for a dying friend and attempts to rescue Tulip, a little gal with an angelic face and a devilish streak.

He stopped in front of the saloon, and got out with the motor running. He strode up onto the sidewalk with the Python in his hands and crashed through the batwings. He fired a blast of white light into the Synth-Box. It exploded in a cloud of smoke as the music wound down to a low growl. He saw Burnett sitting at a table with Tulip.

Two men pulled pistols. Brand shot holes right through them.

"I want everybody in this room to turn around and reach for the ceiling," he shouted.

"Everybody that's not on their feet, get up. Except you, Burnett."

Nobody moved.

Brand fired at the ceiling and a chandelier fell.

"Do it!" he yelled. He lowered the laser rifle. "Next one goes lower."

Deuces Wild, Chapter 14, by L. S. King

And finally, in this issue's serial story, Chapter 14 of the Deuces Wild chronicles by L. S. King, Slap asked to return home after what happened on Eridani, and Tristan agreed. (If I am amused that a story about homecoming is published when the author is away on vacation, well, that just goes to show how easily amused this editor is.)

Tristan took Slap home to Zenos to get his bearings, and found far more than he bargained for, stuck between the alluring Betts, new leader of the sinister Mordas, and the brutal leader of the infamous Myers' Mercs.

It was the planet; it had to be. Tristan didn't know what Zenos meant, or even if it was from a human language or some native tongue, but it had to mean 'bad luck.'

He'd wanted to discover the status of the Mordas, and who was in charge now—at least it seemed that was forthcoming. However, he hadn't wanted to find out with his hands bound and at the wrong end of a dozen weapons.

At least he knew that one merchant was in the Mordas' pocket to allow an ambush in his store. Or perhaps duress had forced his cooperation. Either way, it was an indication the Mordas were still powerful.

With a nudge from the muzzle of a particle beam rifle, he was encouraged to enter the office of the new leader of the Mordas.

Thanks for stopping by Issue 27. As you read this stories, take a moment to think about what it means to belong to something. And know this—no matter where you are, there are people involved with RGR who are very grateful that you're here; one is returning from a galaxy far, far away, one is currently somewhere across the pond, and one is right here in pastoral southern Wisconsin.

We promise not to vaporize your pathetic planet while you're reading this...or at least not until Issue 28. ;)

*John Cook
Breezeway, WI
August 1st, 2007*

Elbow Room

by M. Lawrence Key

It's not often you get seen off by a mob shouting curses. But we did.

My older brothers and I tried to pretend we didn't hear the catcalls and jeers from the crowd on the other side of the tarmac fence. We just kept walking, heads held high, like Father had always told us.

"Baba, what's 'good riddance' mean?" little Jameela asked.

I winced. She was only four and didn't know any better. I was glad she'd only asked about that one, though. There were worse ones being shouted that day.

Ibrahim Musa Amjad Khouri leaned down and scooped up my little sister into his huge arms. His voice rumbled deep down inside his barrel chest and he grinned, showing white teeth under his black, bushy mustache.

"They're just saying goodbye, *habibti*," he said. A light danced in his dark eyes. "But I don't think they're going to miss us much."

#

Jameela looked up at him. Her face was partly hidden by wisps of her black hair, which had come loose from her braids in the wind.

"They don't like us?" she asked.

Ibrahim Khouri looked at the barrier fence, at the masses of people pressed against it, holding signs and shouting at our little group. He turned and looked at the rocket on the horizon. Its tall form shimmered in the August heat coming off the sea of asphalt.

"They're scared, beloved," he said. "They think we're abandoning a sinking ship, and in a way, I suppose we are."

My brothers and I stopped walking to listen to him. We wanted to cling to him like Jameela did, without shame. He was like a rock in a storm to us. Everything was shifting, changing underneath us now, ever since Father had gotten the final permission to start his new colony. We were leaving our planet and its "teeming masses," as Father always said, forever. "Earth is too crowded and worn out," he'd say. "It's like an old rickety house with grime on the walls and people underfoot everywhere. There's no elbowroom left. We need a fresh place, a new place, a place to start over."

People had told him it couldn't be done. But no one told Ibrahim Khouri that for long. Father was brilliant, an accomplished astrophysicist and engineer. His innovations in those fields were numerous, his patents, lucrative. And here we were, at last, about to embark on the culmination of his life's work: a rocket design to seed a colony on another

world—one that orbited another star.

"Let's keep moving," Father said.

We reached the ship without further incident, Father carrying Jameela, my older brothers and I walking ahead, Mother back with the younger children. The rest of the crew had already been there for hours, and we were the last to board. As soon as the main hatch closed, Father became brisk and businesslike.

"Amjad, Omar—stow our packs. Zyad, help your mother get the rest of the family settled," he said. He set Jameela down and patted her head.

"Stay with Mother," he said. He looked up at the dark-haired beauty entering the ship with three other small children in her tow.

"Zainah, get the children secured in their places," he said. "We take off within the hour."

She looked up at him and smiled. "We're really doing it," she said. "At last."

They looked at one another steadily, and I could almost see memories passing between them, like flashes of fire in the dark.

"Yes, my dearest," Father said. "At last."

He turned to me. "I'm going up to check in with the flight crew. Have you made your last

inspections?”

“On my way,” I said, grabbing an infoboard on the way out of the room.

I was the youngest of the four older sons of Ibrahim Khouri—just graduated *summa cum laude* from MIT with a graduate degree in Cryogenic Engineering, and a specialty in Biological Stasis. The rest of my brothers were doctors and engineers, but I was the only one who’d entered space-related engineering. Following in my father’s footsteps, whether I wanted to or not. Now, as I stood in the subzero storage hold of the *Nijmeh*, I was finally getting to put years of research and experiments to practice. Stacked in tier after tier above me were the 1,016 new colonists destined for wherever Father led us. Their frozen and hibernating lives depended on my ability to make sure the cryogenic machines were functioning properly.

I checked the infoboard, its contents shifting as it updated itself from the *Nijmeh*’s main computer. Everything appeared to be okay. I tapped my wrist ‘com with a thickly gloved finger.

“All clear in the Cryo Section,” I said. “I’m heading back.” My breath smoked in the cold.

“Good, Ali,” said the crackling voice of my father. “Hurry. We’re at T-minus ten mins.”

By the time I reached the flight deck and stepped out of the ladder well, the rest of the flight crew were fully strapped in. The rest of the family members were out of the way below, strapped into their own launch chairs. I buckled in and stowed the infoboard. The panel above my head came to life and swung down, giving

me continual readouts of the cryo bay’s status. Some of the readouts were still blank—we would join the colonists in their cold hibernation once the *Nijmeh* cleared Earth’s gravity well and started its long acceleration to our destination. When the computers took over the countdown at T minus thirty-one seconds and the mighty engines beneath us rumbled to life, I was thinking about the people left down on the ground, wondering what kind of future they had.

#

Bells. I could hear bells. I tried to open my eyes, but they were too heavy. The bells continued tolling in the darkness. Where was I? In my great-grandfather’s village in Palestine, the church bells rang like this. But no, I wasn’t there now. A memory eluded my grasp, refusing to be pinned down. My thoughts drifted in the darkness, disoriented.

“Ali, wake up!” The voice of a little girl. My sister, Jameela.

“Be patient with him, Jameela. He always had a tougher time coming out of sleep during the flight tests.” Father’s voice. With a great effort, I forced my eyes open. The light blinded me for a moment, and everything was blurry. There was someone standing over me.

“Baba, he’s awake! He opened his eyes!” Jameela. I groaned and sat up. My long unused muscles protested, but I could move. I felt weak, but nothing was atrophied, I saw as I checked myself over. The support machines had done their job faithfully.

I blinked. My vision cleared. Father was

standing in the middle of the cabin, hale and hearty as ever.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, my son,” he said. He came over and helped me out of the cryotube.

“Where are we?” I asked him as soon as I could make my voice work.

“Alpha Centauri A, orbiting the fourth planet.”

I nodded slowly. “Habitable?”

“Yes, it’s well within the specs of our terraforming module. It’s beautiful. At last, some breathing space. We can start over fresh, my son.”

My father, the stalwart patriarch, looked positively giddy as he said this. He chuckled and clapped me on the back.

“Come on! We’ve got some survey equipment to unload and launch!”

He turned to go, and then the ‘com set in the wall behind us came to life.

“Unidentified ship, please respond,” came a voice from the ‘com. “I repeat, this is Safehaven Colony Control. Please identify yourselves.”

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he said. "Who am I speaking to?" Incredulity thickened his voice so that he could barely get the words out.

"Safehaven Colony Control," came the reply. "What is your destination, *Nijmeh*? We don't show your registration number anywhere. Hold while I check..." The voice trailed off for a second, then: "Oh, God."

We sat waiting, as frozen as we had been in cryosleep. Unseen, Mother had come up the ladder from the cabin below. Now she put her hand on the stiff shoulder of her husband. No one spoke. The 'com crackled again.

"This is Safehaven Colony Control," said the voice. "Sorry it took us a while to find your registration, but we'd lost track of your ship. We had to search more than four hundred and fifty years back into our own records before we found you. Welcome. Better late than never, I guess." The voice on the other end laughed nervously, then hearing no response, said: "We're sending up an immigration admin. She'll process you."

#

"But I don't want to share this world with a million other colonists! That's the whole reason I came out here—to get away!"

"Sir, if you'll please calm down," the immigration admin said.

She and Father had been at it, hammer and tongs, for nearly an hour, with no consensus.

"Listen to me," he said, waving an official-looking document in her face. "I was granted a charter to start a colony in this system, on

any habitable world I could find. I've traveled trillions of kilometers, slept for hundreds of years, got here in one piece, and now you tell me this paper is obsolete!"

He stopped, leaning over the table, breathing heavily. Mother placed a gentle yet restraining hand on his arm. He shook it off like a horse shivering off a fly.

"Look," the immigration admin said, "There's nothing I can do about it." There were sweat stains under her arms. A few strands of dark blonde hair had worked their way loose from under her beret. She sighed.

"I can't help it that Earth's fortunes experienced an upswing soon after you left. History entered the Second Renaissance, and the stardrive was invented half a century later. Unlike you, we can go faster than light now. The fact of the matter is, we got here first."

She looked at him, and her eyes said clearly: deal with it, buster.

She got up from the table, shoved her infopad into her bag, and straightened her disheveled uniform.

"I suggest you file for immigrant status here," she said. She turned to walk out. "Oh, and get rid of this junk heap. It's probably an environmental hazard."

Father's shoulders slumped.

"Omar, escort this officer to her transport," he said in a tired voice.

#

"*Baba*, why aren't we staying? Why are we going away?" As usual, Jameela was being a nuisance, asking an incessant stream of questions.

I was sweating, struggling with an uncooperative bolt, and I had no patience for pesky little sisters.

"Shut up and go away," I said. "Don't ask stupid questions."

"Ali." Father, lying beside me in the half-darkness, only needed one word to reprimand me. It was more than enough. I turned back to my work, ignoring her.

"Jameela, we can't stay here," Father said. "Soon, this world will be as Earth was, crowded and busy. We came out here in search of an empty world, a place where we could start over, live a simpler life, on our own."

He extricated himself from a compartment of the new stardrive manifold we were helping a tech crew from Safehaven install. He brushed dust from his coveralls and stood up gingerly, wincing and massaging his back. He looked at his little girl and cupped one side of her face in his huge hand.

"*Habibti*, there are over a thousand people on this ship depending on us. They signed up with us so that they could have a better life. I can't let them down."

The bolt I'd been working on finally twisted loose and I uttered a cry of victory. Father bent and looked into the compartment.

"Well done. Looks like you're almost there," he said. "The flight crew's fully checked on the

new instrumentation and making their final run-throughs. At this rate, we should be done with the stardrive upgrade and ready to launch by the end of this week."

He straightened and stuck his thumbs inside his belt. The action made him look for a moment like the tribal chieftain his great-great-grandfather had been. I could almost see the flowing robes and the *kaffaiyeh* on his head, the curved scimitar at his side. Honor ran strong in his blood. He would do whatever it took to make sure he fulfilled the bargain he'd made with those colonists in cryosleep. "To live without honor is not to live," he would always say.

Ibrahim Khouri turned with a flourish of invisible robes and stomped off, holding Jameela's hand, to check on the tech crew's progress. I returned to remaining bolts on the recalcitrant panel with renewed vigor.

#

In the end, it took us two weeks to complete the stardrive upgrade as our ship orbited Safehaven. The extra week had Father restlessly wandering the ship like a fine stallion yearning to run out into the vast desert.

"With this upgrade, we'll be able to go further than anyone has yet," he announced to us all, his eyes blazing. "We will find a world beyond all others, a beautiful empty uncharted world where we and all of our colonists can live, and marry and have children," he said. "And we will do it on our own terms."

"Everything checks out, Father," said Elias. "We are cleared with Safehaven Control."

"Preflight tests all register in the green," said the *Nijmeh's* captain, sitting at the pilot's console. Along with Father and I, he was the only crew member not yet sealed in a capsule with frost spidering across the glass. "We're good to go," he said.

Father nodded, his eagerness now only showing in his bright eyes. "To the cryotubes," he said. "Now we sleep."

Once again, we all hibernated. Hundreds of years passed as we lay in our cryotubes and the ship drove on deeper into space, heading on a flight plan towards star systems with habitable orbiting planets. And once more, we all woke to find our *Nijmeh* in stable orbit around a blazing new star. There, only a few hundred thousand kilometers out, lay our new home. The ship's sensors had detected it and pulled us out of that strange convoluted dimension of speed beyond light to which the stardrive had taken us. It was a smaller planet than Earth, but even from this distance, we could tell from its infrared sig and gas spectrum it had vegetation and a breathable atmosphere. When he woke, Father was beside himself.

"My sons, we have reached our destination at last," he said. "Zainah, come here," He gestured to the view port at the rear of the flight deck as the ship pulled into a high orbit above the planet. "Look with me on the place where we will raise our children and they will raise theirs."

My mother smiled serenely and started to move towards Father. Suddenly, the space between them shimmered, and a man stepped neatly out of thin air.

We all stopped still and stared. Mother

gasped and stepped backwards from this apparition. He was clothed in a form-fitting slivery mesh that covered his whole body, except for his face and hands. The skin that did show was as white as salt, and his eyes were an artificial-looking blue.

He swung his gaze around at all of us, and smiled slowly.

"Please don't be alarmed," the man said. "We have detected your ship, and I was sent out to meet it. I am Mediator Slos Duraq. Welcome to Mina."

Father was scowling now, his momentary fear apparently forgotten.

"What do you mean, 'welcome to Mina'? Who, or what are you?" There were dangerous undercurrents in his voice.

"Mina is a tertiary world of the Hegemony," Duraq said, oblivious to Father's rising anger. "We don't have a large population yet, but we will. We were founded, oh, ten years ago by colonists from Thinib, the primary settlement in this sector. We plan on—"

"Shut up!"

Father stalked across the cabin and grabbed Duraq by the throat. "How did you get here first, before us?" he growled at the much smaller man. Duraq writhed in Father's iron grip. "We, we—" He could barely speak. His pale skin was turning a shocking shade of pink.

I dashed to Father's side.

"Baba, please!" I said. "Let him speak!"

Without a further word, Father dropped the

squirming silver-suited mediator to the deck.

Duraq sprawled on the cabin floor like a beached sardine, gasping for air. Finally, he managed to collect himself enough to stand on wobbly legs. "As I was trying to say before your act of violence, we got here by quantum transport," Duraq said, holding his throat and glaring at Father. "Everybody uses it now." He looked around the cabin of our ship. "Except for you people, evidently. What are you using here, stardrive?"

Amjad nodded affirmatively. His face bore a sour look.

"Fascinating," said Duraq. "I remember absorbing stardrives in school. You people are at least a few centuries out of date."

I turned away, bile rising in my throat. In my mind's eye, I could still see the bolt I'd struggled with while working on the stardrive installation, what seemed a few days ago. Now it was just a footnote in history.

Duraq tried on a pleasant smile and rubbed his still-pink throat.

"Listen, no hard feelings," he said. "I won't report that little incident of violence to my superiors. I know that this kind of thing can be a bit disorienting, but—"

"Disorienting?" Father once again loomed over the diminutive mediator.

Duraq cleared his throat hastily. "I mean, you've been asleep for over five hundred years now. You're out of touch. You need to be reoriented back into galactic society."

"Galactic society?"

"Yes." Duraq's voice took on a pedantic tone. "In this enlightened age, the human species knows no limits. We now have colonies all over the galaxy. With the power of quantum transport, we can literally go anywhere we can detect. And soon perhaps beyond..."

He trailed off, staring into empty space, seeming to forget we were in the room with him. Mother broke the silence.

"You mean your thoughts are somehow connected to this means of transportation?"

Duraq looked at her as if she'd just fallen off the back of a vegetable loader.

"Of course," he said. "All humanity throughout the galaxy is mind-connected right now. We use the interconnection to help us navigate. In fact, you are probably the only unplugged humans in existence."

He fixed us with his strange ice-blue eyes. "Considering your brains are untainted by interconnection, I know some scientists who would love to scan you. Quite intriguing."

He folded his arms and closed his eyes.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," he said. "I have to uplink my report on you to the Intra-galactic Network. I'll let you know what is to be done with all of you in a few minutes."

He continued to stand there, stock-still, arms folded, eyes closed. His body began to fade until we could see through it. It was awkward standing around just watching him. So without a word, we all climbed down the ladder to the cabin below to wait. We left Duraq standing there making his report, half-in

and half-out of our existence, looking barely human to our eyes.

#

"What are we going to do now?" asked Omar.

Father slumped into a chair and put his head into his hands.

"I don't know," he said. "I guess we start looking again and hope nobody gets there before we do." He lifted his face to look around at us all, flight crew and family. As his eyes passed over us, assembled there, waiting, he clenched his jaw.

"We will not give up, though," he said. "As-Sabru muftah al-faraj, as they used to say in the old country."

"What does that mean, Father?" I asked.

Ibrahim Musa Amjad Khouri stood to his feet and clapped his hands together.

"'Patience is the key to relief,' my son. There is always hope, if we do not grow weary. We will move on until we reach that which we set out for. What say you all?"

We had just started to answer when Duraq called down from above.

"Hello, down there! I have news!"

We all ascended the ladder and gathered around the silver-clad albino. He was opaque once again and evidently excited about something.

"An announcement has gone out over the

Network,” he said. “A great experiment is taking place. Until now, we have been confined to the three dimensions we see around us. We have been subject to the vagaries of space-time. No longer.”

Duraq paused for dramatic effect. “In just a few moments, all humanity everywhere will receive an upgrade which will allow us to cross dimensional barriers. We will be able to travel anywhere—in this universe or any other—simply through thought alone.”

A notion seemed to strike him.

“Well, I guess that leaves you people out,” he said, “Since you’re not connected. Oh well. We’ll see if we can find a place for you in a museum or an institute somewhere.”

“But we have something we need to say to you,” Father said, a trifle hesitantly, for Duraq’s body was starting to change. It faded at first, and then began to ripple, almost as if waves of static were passing through it. Duraq looked startled for a second, then he grinned. But his grin looked unsure.

“Upgrade’s started,” he said. Then he frowned, cocked his head as if he were listening to a voice only he could hear. “What do you mean, something’s going wrong?” He looked at us with a sudden expression of panic.

“I—”

And then he was gone. No fading away slowly. Just vanished.

We all drew in breath together, then slowly, slowly let it out. Mother crossed herself, murmuring under her breath.

Father just stood there for a few moments like he was carved from stone, looking at the empty spot on the deck. Then he blinked, and his gaze turned inward. He was silent, pensive for a minute more. Then like a glowing ember in the ashes of a dying fire, a light grew in his eyes.

He turned and crossed to his navigation console. We followed in his wake, still stunned mute by Duraq’s disappearance. We watched him punch in the keys to get a readout, and then study that readout intently. The Nijmeh’s science officer, who knew how to read the screens better than he, bent over them with him. Father stabbed his finger at a row of figures.

“Can you confirm this sensor feedback?” he said.

The science officer’s fingers danced over the keys. When she was done, she looked up and said one word: “Nobody.”

Relief cascaded over Father’s face, washing away the lines of tension. He looked around at us—waiting, expectant.

“Family, colleagues, at last we have arrived at our new home,” he said. “The world below us waits for us now, empty.”

“Empty?” Mother said. “What happened to the people?”

Father opened his mouth with a quick answer, thought better of it, finally said:

“I don’t know. Duraq said they were all connected, so I guess they’ve all gone to the same place as him.”

“I hope it’s a good place,” she said. “They deserved at least that much, I guess.”

Father simply nodded. He reached out and took Mother’s hand in his. Together, they walked to a nearby viewport to watch as the flight crew maneuvered the ship into a parking orbit around our pristine new world. The rest of us crowded around other viewports to catch a glimpse of our new world—vast continents, rolling oceans, swirling clouds.

“At last,” Mother said.

Father grinned, his white teeth gleaming below his strong, black mustache.

“Yes, at last,” he said. “Some elbowroom.”



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.

Tulip

A Jack Brand story

by John M. Whalen

Brand pulled to a stop on top of the rise and felt the Hover-Jeep sink down on the ground as the anti-gravity field under the vehicle dissipated. It was a moonless night and down in the draw below him, bolts of blue and purple light streamed back and forth at each other from opposite directions. It was a firefight.

Someone was using an Electro-Rifle. Blue waves of electricity crackled and sent iridescent spheres of light across the desert sand toward a point where three magenta-colored plasma beams fired back. Three against one. Not good odds for whoever was behind the Electro-Rifle. It wasn't any of his business, but still—three against one. He grabbed the CAR-220 down from the gun rack behind his head and stepped out of the Jeep.

With his eyes fastened on the action down below, his finger automatically clicked the Plasma Activator and he could feel the carbine becoming energized in his hands. He walked out to the edge of the rise and lay down on his stomach. The combatants, whoever they were, were a good two hundred feet below him and maybe a quarter mile distant. He brought the infrared scope up to his eye. The bright green outline of the man with the Electro-Rifle appeared as the scope automatically brought him into focus. The man lay prone behind a rock. Maybe it was his imagination, but Brand thought there was something familiar about

him; the way he waited calmly while the Plasma Rifles riddled the rocks around him and then got off a shot when they paused for a moment. Then Brand saw a bright beam strike the man near his shoulder, and his body wriggled back behind the rock and lay still a minute.

Brand slid the scope across the sand and found the three Plasma shooters. He could tell just from the outline of their bodies they were Tulon Nomads. He saw their dune buggies parked not far behind them. Desert scum left behind after the Big Shut Down—after Big Oil abandoned Tulon. The planet had boomed for a hundred years, during the Terror War back on Earth, when they needed Tulon's crude to keep the war machine going. But after the discovery of Digital Atomic fuel, nobody needed oil. Now the Nomads roamed the desert country of Tulon, raping and pillaging, roaming far and wide in their dune buggies. There was still plenty of gas in the abandoned refineries. And now it was all free.

Brand took a bead on one of them. He could see the outline of the mohawk on top of his bald head. He squeezed the trigger. The purple plasma beam *twerked* out of the carbine and Brand saw the mohawk fly off the Nomad's head in splintered pieces. He scoped onto the Nomad to his left and fired. *Twerk*. The beam hit him in the shoulder. He saw the three get to their feet. They pointed up toward

where he was. One of them brought his rifle up to his shoulder. Brand fired again. *Twerk*. The man flew back and lay still on the sand. The other two ran for their buggies. Brand heard the sound of their combustion engines starting and the roar of their tail pipes as they drove off, leaving their companion behind.

Brand went back to the Hover-Jeep and racked the carbine. A few minutes later he glided across the floor of the desert to the spot where the wounded man still lay behind the rock. Brand cut the motor and jumped out, a canteen in his hand. He saw the man now sitting with his back against the rock, his legs splayed out wide. His arms down at his sides. The dark moustache and shaggy black eyebrows turned his way, and Brand recognized him.

"Kincaid!" Brand said, kneeling down. He saw a big dark spot on the front of the man's shirt. It hadn't been a shoulder wound.

"That you, Brand?" the man said, looking up at him half in a daze. "Always a day late and a dollar short. Could have used you half hour before you got here."

"Drink this." Brand held the canteen up to his lips. The man took a gulp, but most of it poured down on his chest.

"Always figured to end up this way," Kincaid said. "Should have gone back to Earth during

the Big Shut Down. Would have to if it hadn't been for Tulip."

"Tulip?"

"My kid," the man said. "You remember. I have a daughter. Prettiest thing this side of an angel. Only thing, she had the wild spirit of a little devil."

"I thought you'd gone Earth-side with the others," Brand said. "Most of the cadre from the Tulon Security Force went home."

"What are you doing here? Still looking for that sister of yours?"

"I got no reason to go back to Earth. How bad is it?"

Kincaid looked down at this chest.

"It's over for me, Brand," he said. "Knew it would go this way. Ambushed by some no-account Nomad scum for no reason at all."

"I killed one of them."

"Shoulda killed them all. You had the high ground."

"They won't be back."

Kincaid looked off across the long dark night.

"Brand, do me a favor?"

"What is it?"

"It's Tulip. Crazy kid. She ran off with an oil rigger named Trent Mahoney. A bum if ever there was one. He took out Black Creek way. Heard he got himself killed in a gunfight. Tulip's

still out there in that sink hole. Heard some bad stories. She's workin' in a waterin' hole-slash-whore house out there called the Black Creek Saloon. Run by a slime bucket name of Burnett."

"Never heard of him. But I heard of Black Creek. A dung heap."

"I was on my way to get her. Bring her home. Dorothy's waitin' for me to bring our little girl back. I hate to ask it. Think you could go out Black Creek way?"

Black Creek was four hundred miles west of where they were, Brand reckoned. He'd been heading north, back toward Tulon Central. He'd gone south following a false lead to his sister's whereabouts. He might as well go west as north.

"Sure," he said. "You want me to take her to your wife?"

"Be mighty decent of you."

"Where's she living?"

"In Riggsville. Got a little place there. You take Tulip to her, Brand. And tell them to get the next shuttle back Earth. This place ain't fit for Earthsiders no more."

"All right, Kincaid," Brand said, holding the canteen up to the man's lips.

Kincaid didn't seem to notice the offered drink.

"You recall that time we chased down the Morton gang?" the dying man asked. His eyes were full of the stars that hung in the big night sky over them. "Had them penned up in Shy

Man's Bluff. All six of 'em. And it was just you, me and that fellow Johnson. The man with the big head of red hair. Always wore those yellow suspenders. We asked them to give themselves up and in answer, the Morton's just started blasting away. Five hours we shot it out with them. The wouldn't let us take 'em alive. Those were some times. You recall, Brand?"

Brand lowered the canteen as Kincaid's head dropped to his shoulder and his body slid off the big rock it had been leaning on.

Brand recalled. But he remembered more than that. He remembered how Kincaid had saved his life once. But he was too big a man to ever mention it. Four hundred miles out of his way wasn't that far to go.

#

Black Creek had a reputation as a busted up, broken down helltown. Fifty years ago Trans-Exxon had found a gusher there, one of the biggest oil deposits on the planet. In a matter of weeks the company sent the derricks and drill riggers to start operations even before the construction crews arrived with their pre-fab dwelling units. Black Creek was born and populated by a thousand workers and their families in a matter of weeks. For fifty years it had prospered as a wild town next to the fields where the drills turned and dug into the earth twenty-four hours a day.

Now that the boom had crashed, it was just a half-wild town on the edge of nowhere, half-filled with unemployed oil workers who still had severance money left, outlaws who'd stolen money from the banks before they shut down, and Nomads just looking to raise hell.

It was helltown, sitting on top of a gigantic underground river of oil.

Brand drove down the main road that ran past the abandoned oil fields at sundown. The hot Tulon sun setting behind distant mountains turned the sky purple and red as he passed by the rusted skeletons of the derricks and sand dredgers that now stood on the barren surface of the desert like gigantic, immobilized mechanical men. There was an eeriness to the place.

A sense of loss and waste swept over Brand as he drove by the field and looked ahead at the burnt out buildings of Black Creek. They were all wood buildings that had been bleached nearly white by the scorching sun. He drove by a church that stood at the beginning of the main street. But the church looked like it hadn't been used in years. The windows were boarded up and there was a big hole in the short steeple. A drunk slept on the steps, an empty bottle in his hand.

Brand drove down the street, passing by run-down shacks and buildings that housed stores, a hotel, a garage, a barber shop, several saloons, and casinos. Nomads with greasy mohawks looked at him suspiciously as he drove by. Hard cases with their hands on their hips gave him the eye and spit into the street. Two Nomads spilled out into the street from the door of one of the bars, shooting at each other with handguns that were at least 80 years old. They emptied their guns into each other until one of them fell dead. People stood around watching and laughing. At the end of the street, Brand saw the Black Creek Saloon. He pulled up to the curb in front and got out of the jeep.

He left the carbine in the rack, shut the windows, and locked the doors with the remote key. He stepped up on the boardwalk and let the palm of his hand rest on the ivory handled butt of the Beretta Electro-Pistol strapped down on his leg. He looked up the length of the street at the sorry dregs meandering about and wondered what it was like in this hellhole at night. With any luck, he'd never know.

Brand turned around, pushed through the batwing doors, and walked into the Black Creek Saloon. It was a dingy, dusty place. A man reclined on the bar as he walked in, eyeing him curiously. A half-dozen ex-riggers sat playing cards. An electronic Synth-box pumped out some twentieth century acid-rock. Three men sat at a table with a beat-up looking woman in a red dress. They were all half drunk.

A thin, hard looking man with a long jaw sat at another table playing solitaire. He had a bottle and a glass in front of him. He was dressed a little better than the others—black suit jacket, vest, and a string tie. Another man sat next to him. He was a big man with black hair and black eyes. He wore a shirt covered in black and red checks. He had a glass of Synth-beer in front of him on the table and his eyes snapped out of the hazy stupor he'd been in to watch Brand as he came in.

"Want somethin' to drink?" the man lying on the bar asked.

"Bourbon. Beer chaser."

"Synth-Turkey, okay? None of the real stuff."

"All right," Brand said. He didn't like synthetic whiskey, but it was all you could get

in a remote area like this. The man swung his legs over the bar and dropped down behind it. Brand heard him rattling glass as he sat down at a table by the wall. He could feel the big man's eyes on him and he looked over at him. The man stared at him blankly, as if he were looking at a spot on the wall. Then he slowly lowered his eyes, picked up his beer and took a drink. Brand saw a Colt .345 Plasma Repeater strapped to the big man's leg under the table.

"You want a woman?" The barkeep stood next to him, laying the shot and beer down on the table in front of him.

"Might at that," Brand said.

"You got any preference?" the barkeep asked. "We got a Chinee girl with the biggest pair of—" he hesitated—"almond-shaped eyes you ever saw. Haw haw. You thought I was gonna say somethin' else, didn't you? You ever made it with a Chinee girl?"

"You got a girl here named Tulip?"

The well-dressed man at the other table had been about to place a red jack on a black queen when his hand suddenly froze in mid-air. His dark green eyes flashed over at Brand and after a minute, his hand lowered the jack down on top of the queen.

"Yeah, we got a girl here by that name," the barkeep said. "Word's gettin' out about her, eh? Don't wonder. She's kinda special."

"Where'd you hear about her?" It was the man with the cards in his hands.

Brand shifted in his chair to look over at him.

"Friend of mine mentioned her."

"Friend have a name?"

"Might have. Who are you?"

"Jason Burnett. I own this place. Now what'd you say the name of that friend of yours was?"

"Why'd you want to know?"

"Just curious," Burnett said. He placed the deck of cards down carefully on the table and got up. The big man next to him started to get up, but Burnett waved him down. He stepped over to Brand's table and pulled up a chair. He gave a sharp look to the barkeep, who scuttled back over to the bar.

"Didn't get your name, stranger," Burnett said.

"Didn't give it. But if you want to know, it's Brand. Jack Brand."

"From Tulon Central?"

"That's right."

"Used to work for the Tulon Security Force. Special agent. Heard you retired."

"You're pretty well informed."

"In my business, it pays to keep up with the news," Burnett said. "Now why exactly did you come to Black Creek, Mr. Brand?"

"Tulip Kincaid."

"What about her?"

"I came to get her. That friend of mine I

mentioned was her father. He'd have come only he got himself killed. Told him I'd get his little girl and take her home. You got any objections?"

Burnett reached inside his jacket, and Brand stiffened, his gun hand ready. Burnett's hand came out of his jacket with a cigar in it. He put it in his mouth, and the big man he'd left at the other table got up and came over with a match already lit. He held the flame to the end of Burnett's cigar, and Burnett drew on it. The tip of the cigar drew the yellow-blue flame in, let go of it, and pulled it in again as a plume of smoke rose toward the ceiling.

"Plenty of objections," he said. The big man stood behind Burnett, his arms folded across his chest, his dark eyes fastened tight on Brand. "This place may not look like much during the day, but at night we get a fair amount of business. Still some money to be made in this town before it all goes broke. Tulip's one of our finest attractions. She brings in a good share of business every night. I'd hate to lose that. In fact, I wouldn't like it at all."

The big man behind Burnett lowered his arms to his sides and rested the heel of his right hand on the butt of the Colt. A kind of smirk came into his eyes. Seated the way he was, Brand knew he'd never be able to draw his Beretta and get off a clean shot, before the big man drew and fired.

"She for sale?" Brand asked. He had money deposited in the Tulon Central Bank. The reward Virtual Fuel had paid for the finding of the daughter of the company's CEO. He could try to shoot his way out of Black Creek, but if there was an easier way, why not?

"Sorry," Burnett said. "Not for sale." He raised the cigar in the air. "Butch."

The big man drew the Colt and aimed the muzzle at Brand's head.

"Reach over with your left hand, Mr. Brand, and take that pistol out of the holster and set it down easy on the table," Burnett said.

Brand kept his eyes on the big man's trigger finger. It gripped the trigger of the Colt in a cool, relaxed way. The way a professional would. Brand reached across his lap and grabbed the butt of his Beretta with the fingers of his left hand. The gun slid out of the leather holster Velcroed to his leg and he lifted it up over the table by the butt and set it down. He kept his hand over it a minute and looked at Burnett.

"Go ahead," the man said. "Try it. Butch'd love it."

Brand moved his hand back and sat back in his chair. Burnett reached out and picked the gun up. He set the butt down on the table, and pointed the barrel at Brand.

"All right, Butch," he said.

The big man leaned forward, a long arm shot across the table, and a meaty fist cracked hard against Brand's jaw. Brand went backwards in the chair and landed on the floor, the back of the chair breaking under him. He started to get up, but Butch was already on him, pulling him up by his shirt. A bone crunching punch to the chin sent Brand reeling back. He crashed into a wall. He started toward the big man. A pale wave of blue light shot out of the Beretta in Burnett's hand. Brand stopped in his tracks, his body tingling with numbness. Burnett had

set the gun to stun. Unable to move, Brand could only stand immobile as Butch dropped a shoulder and threw his whole body behind his next punch. It sent Brand flying backwards, crashing into a table and down on the floor.

By now the other men in the bar were on their feet standing a safe distance away, their eyes hungry for the violence; sick, twisted smiles on their faces. Brand got up on his hands and knees in time for Butch to swing the toe of his size fourteen boot hard into his stomach. It knocked the wind out of him and he stayed down on all fours trying to breathe. Butch grabbed him by the hair and pulled him to his feet. He held Brand out at arm's length and cocked his right fist back. Through blurry eyes Brand could see that Butch's body blocked Burnett's view. Brand kicked up with his right foot and sent the toe of his boot hard into the man's groin. Butch groaned and doubled over. Brand hit the big man hard in the face and fell down with him as Burnett fired. The shot went over his head. He hit the floor, tore Butch's Colt out of its holster, and fired at Burnett. A purple beam struck the saloon keeper in the arm. Burnett yelled and dropped the Beretta. He jumped out of the chair.

"Stand still," Brand said, getting to his feet. He stepped toward Burnett and picked up his pistol. He tucked the Colt under his belt and covered Burnett with his own gun, moving the power setting from stun to lethal. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. He turned and saw the barkeep coming up from behind the bar with an old fashioned sawed-off shot gun in his hands. Brand fired a short burst at him and the man flew back down behind the bar.

"Anyone else?" he asked, looking over the other men in the saloon. They all stood with their hands up, away from their weapons. He grabbed Burnett by the shoulder and spun him around. Using him as a shield, he pointed the Beretta at the other men. "All right. I want you all to take your weapons out of their holsters and drop them on the floor. Any tricky moves and your boss gets it."

They hesitated.

"Do what he says," Burnett shouted, holding his right upper arm. The men complied and an assortment of ray guns and cartridge pistols clattered to the barroom floor.

Brand saw a door over by the end of the bar.

"What's in there?" he asked Burnett.

"You shot me," Burnett said. "I need a doctor."

"You'll live. What's in there?"

"A storeroom."

"All right," Brand waved the Beretta. "Get over there." He saw Butch getting up slowly from the floor. "Somebody help big boy over there."

One of the men grabbed Butch by the arm and led him over to the store room.

"Open that door," Brand said. "And get in there. All of you."

One by one they men crowded into the small room. Burnett started to follow.

"Not you," Brand said. "Where's the key?"

Burnett reached into a pocket and took out a ring of keys.

"Lock it."

"Sit tight, boys," Burnett said. He shut the door and turned the key in the lock. Brand snatched the key ring from him and put it in his pocket.

"Take me to the girl," he told Burnett.

"You'll never get away with this," the saloonkeeper told him.

"We'll see. Get moving."

#

Brand followed him across the bar to the staircase that led to the second floor. They climbed up the stairs, walked along the balcony overlooking the bar and turned down a hallway that was covered with a threadbare burgundy carpet. Burnett stopped at the second door on the right. He raised his hand to knock.

"This won't do any good," he said. "You'll be wasting your time."

He knocked lightly on the mahogany door.

"Come in," a soft, feminine voice answered. Burnett opened the door and they stepped inside.

There was a big four-poster bed in the middle of the room, lace curtains on the windows, and a couple of crystal lamps. A blonde girl sat in a chair at a vanity. She wore a red low cut teddy with ruffles along the hem that probably only

reached the top of her thighs when she stood up. She held a brush that seemed tangled in her long hair and looked at them through the mirror in front of her. With fumbling fingers she pulled the brush free of her hair and set it down on the vanity table.

"Jason!" She turned unsteadily and gazed up at them through cloudy eyes. "What time is it? You usually don't come so early." She tried to stand up but her legs were too unsteady. She sat back down and saw Brand. "Who's this? A new customer?"

"No, Tulip," Burnett said. "Meet Sir Galahad. He's come to your rescue. He's going to take you away from all this."

"Huh?" the girl said, gazing up in confusion. "Whaddya mean?"

"What's she on?" Brand asked Burnett.

"Who knows?" Burnett shrugged. "She'll take whatever she can get her hands on."

Brand brought the Beretta up and pressed it hard in Burnett's neck. "I asked you a question."

"Super Meth mixed with a little old fashioned laudanum," Burnett said. "Keeps 'em tame. Now what about my arm? It hurts."

Brand swung the Beretta and the heavy metal barrel came down hard on the side of Burnett's head. The saloonkeeper fell down on the floor.

"That'll keep you tame for a while," Brand said.

The girl looked at Burnett lying on the

floor.

"Jason!" She shot a frightened glance up at Brand. "What did you do that for?"

"Where are your clothes?" Brand asked.

"Clothes?"

Brand walked over to a closet and opened the door. He saw a few dresses and a couple of shirts. A pair of jeans hanging on a hook. He grabbed one of the shirts and the jeans.

"Put these on," he said, throwing them on the bed.

"What are you talkin' about?" the girl said. She stood up, weaving slightly from side to side. She kept one hand on the vanity table behind her. "What are you doing?"

"We're getting out of here," Brand said.

"Are you crazy? Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of your father's," Brand said. "I'm sorry to tell you, but he's dead. He died on his way to get you. He asked me to take you home."

"Home? Dead?" Her eyes seemed lost in a daze as she tried to comprehend Brand's words. Then suddenly she lifted her head back and began to laugh. It started as a giggle, but built steadily into a shrieking, uncontrollable fit of raging laughter. Brand came close, grabbed her shoulders and shook her. The laughter got louder. He shook her again and then slapped her hard across the face. He slapped her again, and the laughter stopped. Tulip stood there staring at him glassy-eyed, a thin trace of blood running down from her lip.

"Get out of here," she yelled. "Get out and leave me alone."

"I told you to put those clothes on," Brand said. "Don't make me tell you again."

"Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?" she asked. "What makes you think I want to go home? What makes you think I care if my father's dead? Home was nothing more to me than a prison. And my father? When was he ever around when I needed him? Always off on a manhunt chasing down a criminal. He cared more about that damn badge he wore than mother or me. And when he was there he ran the house like a jail. Rules for everything. Punishments if you stepped out of line. Hard punishment. He liked to use a cane on my backside."

"Don't you want to see your mother? She'll be all alone now."

"She was always alone," Tulip said. "I'm not going back with you. There's nothing to go back to. And I've got a life here. I like this life. I'm free. Free to do whatever I want." She looked at Burnett still lying unconscious on the floor. "Jason!" She ran to him and fell down on top of him. She wrapped her arms around him. "Wake up, honey. Wake up. Don't let him take me." She slid her arms under his coat and hugged him.

Burnett started waking up.

"Get off him," Brand said and grabbed the girl's arm. Tulip jumped to her feet. Brand saw the knife too late. Steel flashed and he felt sharp pain. He staggered back, the handle of the knife sticking out of his right shoulder. The girl dropped to her knees and sank her teeth in

the back of his gun hand.

"That's it, honey," Burnett said jumping to his feet. He stepped in and pushed Brand's gun hand to the side. He grabbed the Colt Brand had tucked into his waistband and brought it down hard on his head. Brand fell back against the wall and slid down onto the floor.

#

Cold water splashed and woke him up. Brand shook the water out of his hair and eyes. He was on the barroom floor. He looked up at Butch standing over him with an empty bucket. The big man threw the bucket to the side and stood towering over him.

"Welcome back, Brand," Burnett said. Brand turned his head and saw him sitting in a chair with his elbow resting on the edge of one of the tables. He had a cigar in his hand and a glass half full of whiskey in the other. He had taken the suit jacket off and Brand saw a bandage wrapped around his bicep below a rolled up sleeve. Brand sat up slowly. His body ached all over. The pain in his shoulder had dulled somewhat. The knife was gone from his shoulder. He guessed the stab wound had stopped bleeding.

"We were wondering what we were going to do for entertainment tonight," Burnett said. "Lucky for us you happened along."

Brand's head cleared and now he saw more than a dozen men and half as many women standing around the bar, looking at him. Tulip Kincaid sat in a chair at the other side of the table where Burnett sat. She wore a bright blue silk dress that clung tightly to her youthful

figure. There was heavy makeup on her face and the starlight in her eyes told Brand that she'd been given more dope.

"Glad I could oblige," Brand said. He got to his feet. The room seemed to tilt at a slight angle. He shook his head. It didn't help.

"Seems like you didn't learn much from that beating Butch gave you this afternoon," Burnett said. "Maybe you need a few more lessons."

Brand looked over his shoulder and saw his Hover-Jeep still parked outside. If he could just get to it.

"Oh, you thinking of this?" Burnett said. He held up Brand's CAR-220 Carbine. "We went through your jeep. Here's your keys. You can have them back," he said with a laugh. He tossed the keys. Brand caught them and put them in his pocket.

"I always heard you were a pretty good man with your fists," Burnett said. "This time I won't interfere. Just you and Butch until one of you can't stand anymore. How's that?" He picked up his drink and took several big gulps. "Fraid there isn't any purse for this bout. Except the winner gets to walk away."

Burnett took a short drink, and set the glass down on the table.

"All right," he said. He held up an imaginary bell and 'dinged' it. "Round one."

Butch tromped in quickly, his fists as big as ham hocks. Brand backed and circled, keeping his guard up. The big man swung his right. Brand sidestepped it, moved in, and landed a

hard left to the midsection and an uppercut to Butch's jaw. The crowd yelled excitedly, but the punches had no effect. The big man swung a vicious backhand that sent Brand careening backwards. His back slammed against the bar and the big man charged again.

"Get him," a couple of the men hollered.

Brand grabbed a bottle sitting on the bar and smashed it on the brute's head. Wows of surprise came up from the crowd. But it only seemed to infuriate Butch. He had Brand trapped against the bar and began pummeling him with one blow after another. Brand went down.

"Kill him, kill him," he heard a high, excited voice say. It was Tulip Kincaid.

The big man's knee came up hard into his face. Brand fell to the floor. What happened next, he would never remember. There were more kicks. More punches. He was vaguely aware of being lifted in the air, sailing through the front window, and landing out on the sidewalk.

The crowd spilled out of the Black Creek Saloon and stood around him. Burnett came out with a bottle of Synth-Whiskey in his grip. He poured it over Brand.

"Have a drink, Brand," he said laughing. "Drink up and get out of here as soon as you're able to get up. And don't come back. The only reason I don't kill you is, I don't want the Tulon Security Force sending anybody down here to investigate your murder. I heard they don't take kindly to their people getting snuffed. Not even their early retirees. Bad for their image."

Brand looked up at him. He saw Tulip standing next to him, holding onto his arm. There was a sick little smile on her face.

"That's right," she said, pointing a finger at him. "Go back to that lousy world you come from and don't come back."

"Come on," Burnett said, and he led her back into the saloon. The crowd followed them back inside.

Brand fought to keep conscious. His body screamed for rest. It wanted to just lie there in the puddle of blood and Synth-Whiskey and never get up again. He took a deep breath. Pain flared in his ribs, some of which were no doubt broken. He sat up. His head ached, blood dripped from his mouth. He crawled toward the jeep. It seemed to take forever, but eventually, he stood by the jeep and opened the door. He fell into the seat and let the door swing shut. He put the key in the ignition and started the motor. His hands burned, and it felt as though one finger was broken as he grabbed the steering wheel. He looked through the windshield and could see through the shattered saloon window. The crowd inside was dancing to the electronic synth box. The booze was flowing, and they were so busy having a good time, they seemed to have forgotten all about him.

He backed the jeep up turned out into the street and drove off quietly into the night.

#

Brand pulled the jeep over behind one of the abandoned oil derricks. The desert night was cold, and stars twinkled icily in the dark sky

above. He got out of the jeep and slammed the door shut. He stood unsteadily for a moment and took another deep breath. His head was beginning to clear. He could see the lights of Black Creek about a mile away. He walked to the rear of the Jeep and opened the rear hatch. The ten-gallon container of water was still there. He pulled it closer and opened the spigot. He let the water pour into his cupped hands and lowered his face into it. It felt cool, life-giving. He let it pour and splashed it again and again and rubbed it over his face, neck, and head. He poured some into his mouth and gulped it with deep grateful gasps.

He turned the spigot off and opened a first aid kit he kept under the front seat. He found a roll of adhesive tape in it. He tore off the shreds of what was left of his shirt, unrolled the tape and wrapped it around and around over his ribs. He used most of the roll, but when he was done, he felt better. It didn't hurt when he breathed. He didn't bother with the rest of the assorted bruises, scrapes, and cuts. The gash in his shoulder had closed up and stopped bleeding. He took a disinfectant out of the kit and sprayed it over the cut. From a duffel bag behind the front seat he took out a fresh shirt and put it on.

He pulled the carpeting off the floor of the rear hatch, found a key on his key ring, and put it into a lock embedded in the floor. The lock sprung, and the floor popped up an inch or two. Brand grabbed the edge of the metal flooring and lifted it. He reached inside the hollowed out space under the floor and grabbed hold of the Python Z-20 Laser Rifle. The handgrip felt cool and reassuring as he lifted it out of the car. The long shiny black barrel seemed to pick up light from the stars overhead. He clicked

the safety off and held it silently for a moment in both hands, and then he slung it over his shoulder by the strap. He found a metal box under the floor and opened it. He took out two round objects and walked with them over to the nearby derrick. He stooped down, pressed a button on the underside of the metal object in his hand. Four red LED zeros appeared in a small plastic window on top. He pressed another button and soon the numbers read: 05:00. He set the electronic claymore down on the metal cover that capped the well. He walked over to the next derrick and did the same thing. By the time he was finished the time already read 04:49.

Brand jumped into the Hover-Jeep and drove straight into Black Creek as fast as the vehicle would move. He passed by the abandoned church and drove down a street that roared with mad debauchery. The denizens of Black Creek were having a night. He stopped in front of the saloon, and got out with the motor running. He strode up onto the sidewalk with the Python in his hands and crashed through the batwings. He fired a blast of white light into the Synth-Box. It exploded in a cloud of smoke as the music wound down to a low growl. He saw Burnett sitting at a table with Tulip.

Two men pulled pistols. Brand shot holes right through them.

"I want everybody in this room to turn around and reach for the ceiling," he shouted. "Everybody that's not on their feet, get up. Except you, Burnett."

Nobody moved.

Brand fired at the ceiling and a chandelier fell.

"Do it!" he yelled. He lowered the laser rifle. "Next one goes lower."

The crowd turned and twenty pairs of hands reached up.

"Send the girl over here, Burnett," Brand said.

"You're crazy," Burnett said. "Really crazy."

Brand pulled the trigger. A laser beam cracked the table next to Burnett in half.

"Well go on," Burnett told the girl. "You better go with him."

"I don't want to go," Tulip said. "I want to stay here."

"Go on!" Burnett shouted.

The girl got to her feet. "You don't want me anymore?"

Brand knew there wasn't much time left before all hell broke loose. He heard a board creak behind him. He turned. Butch stood two feet away, his big meaty hands reaching for him. Brand swung the butt of the Python and cracked the man's jaw. Butch sank down on his knees and Brand swung the gun again, fracturing the giant's skull. Brand turned and saw Burnett pulling Butch's Colt from his belt. Too bad for him he hadn't given it back to the big man. Brand fired and Burnett flew back on the floor with a hole in his chest. The crowd turned and men started to go for their weapons. Brand ran forward and grabbed Tulip by the arm. He started backing to the door with her and shot at a man who'd drawn a pistol.

"He's only one man," somebody shouted.

"He can't kill all of us."

They started turning and going for their weapons. Brand knew he wouldn't make it to the door. A huge explosion ripped through the night. The ground shook and everyone stopped in their tracks. A gigantic ball of orange flame rose up over the oil fields. A second explosion shook the building, rattling the shingles on the walls.

"The oil fields!" Someone shouted. "This place'll go up like a Molotov cocktail."

Brand picked the girl up and threw her over his shoulder. Too confused to stop him, the crowd, in a panic, began shouting and screaming, and then followed him as he ran out the front door. They made no attempt to stop him as he got into the jeep. They were too busy trying to find their own vehicles. Brand threw the girl into the front seat.

"Take your hands off me," she shouted. "I ain't going with you. Let me out."

Brand clipped her on the jaw, and she sank back in the seat unconscious. He backed away from the saloon and drove off down the other end of the street away from the oil fields. As he sped away he looked in the rearview mirror and could see panic in the streets. The people of Black Creek came running out of the saloons and casinos. He could see vehicles pouring out into the street behind him. But it was too late. The ground under Black Creek suddenly erupted, and a wall of orange flame roared up. The street buckled and cars flew in the air and exploded. The buildings went up like tinder. Brand kept his foot on the pedal. He could feel the heat of the flames behind him. There were more explosions and soon all he could see was

fire reaching up into the cold black sky. Fire that put the stars out and turned night into day.

Brand took a deep breath. He was out of it. They were out of it. He looked over at the unconscious girl. She'd be hell when she woke up. He had rope and tape in the back. He'd most likely need it. He'd get her to a hospital in Tulon Central. They'd put her in de-tox. Who knows, in time, she might even be grateful.

Brand looked out across the dark dunes of the Tulon Desert and up at the merciless stars. Four hundred miles west his old friend lay under the rocks he'd piled above the sandy grave he'd dug for him. He'd paid his debt to Kincaid for saving his life. He didn't know if the man would rest easier because of it, but he knew he would. He wondered, when the time came, who'd dig his grave?



JOHN M. WHALEN

*John M. Whalen's stories have appeared in **Flashing Swords**, **pulpanddagger.com** and **Universe Pathways** magazine. His Jack Brand stories have become a staple here at Ray Gun Revival.*

Contact the author [here](#).

Featured Artist

Jorik Dozy (Akajork)

Name:

Jorik Dozy (Akajork)

Age:

19

Hobbies:

CG, film, music, paragliding, shooting

Favorite Artist:

I have a lot of favorite artists. Well, you could say I have none, because there are just too many artists to pick from! I love the works of Dylan Cole, the Hatch team, and Dusso but there are so many less famous artists who are great! Burning-Liquid, Tigaer, Robert Maschke, Gary Tongue, etc.

When did you start creating art?

About eight months ago when I saw some work on deviantART. I just looked at it and thought, "Holy cr*p! I want to know how to do that." So I started fooling around in Photoshop and did a lot of tutorials. I still do tutorials, by the way; you always learn new stuff from them. The online community is perfectly good education. You can learn a profession in these modern times by just doing self-study on the net, it's really great.

What media do you work in?

I work with the Adobe suites and sometimes a little bit of Flash. I'm starting to use Cinema 4D actually for 3D matte paintings. 3D is a must these days to handle because of all the work done in it. 3D haters can't easily escape 3D anymore and it's becoming more important everyday. So I need and want to learn it. I think Cinema 4D is a good





program to learn 3D. It's user friendly and not as difficult as 3DS Max or Maya.

Where your work has been featured?

I have only done art for eight months so my work hasn't been featured a lot. I received a Daily Deviation recently so that's a pretty nice feature. But mainly my work has only been featured on sites like deviantART, mattepainting.org, or *Planet Renders*.

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

You can go to akajork.deviantart.com if you want to view my art gallery and buy prints. If you want to look at my freelance projects/web design, you should visit my own website,

www.akajork.com. There you can find any other info and work of mine.

What were your early influences?

In the beginning I didn't know much about the CG world. So my main influences were the fellow designers around me. I looked a lot to other peoples' work and learned a lot from it. Chatting online with other artists can really help. There are so many talented young people out there that know the deal; just by talking to them I learned stuff that eight months ago I didn't even think were possible for me. But the main influence was, and still is, the fact that I want to be successful in life and I want to accomplish the goals I go for. I'm an extremely motivated person and just want to go for something 100%. Right now, that goal is to make it as a matte painter or CG artist in the movie industry. I hope I'll get there someday.

What are your current influences?

The art I watch every single day. There isn't a day going by in which I don't watch other peoples' work. Just look and learn, pay attention to detail and learn how to recreate it. Fantasy plays a big part with that. Just come up with an idea and don't stop working in it until you've



reached the quality of which you have pictured it. I still have to learn a lot, but I hold on to this concept and until now it really helped. So go out and look and observe!

What inspired the art for the cover?

Well, there isn't really a clear inspiration for the cover art. It's just a feeling of wanting to create a world full of mysteries and secrets. A world that you just want to go in and explore, and of course it must be beautiful. It isn't based on something that I know; it is just the result of a feeling and a concept in someone's mind trying to put it there for everyone to view.

Where do you get your inspiration / what inspires you?

The outside world. I go outside and look at nature, people, animals and I get inspired. The world is such a beautiful place, and there's a lot to discover. I'm only nineteen years old, so I still have so many things to discover in this world, and I can't wait to do so. I just want to feel alive and creating images really helps with that. I also gain a lot of inspiration from film and documentaries. Worlds like Middle Earth are perfect inspiration places, and there are so many people who get inspired by such worlds and stories. I'm one of them.

What have been your greatest successes? How has success impacted you / your work?

I haven't gotten many successes yet, but one of them is getting loads of freelance action. It really helped me to get more experience and to learn many new things. In art, my great success is the Daily Deviation reward I just received. It's a real honor to get one!

What are your favorite tools / equipment for producing your art?

I mainly use Adobe's Photoshop. In my opinion, it's just the perfect and best program for matte painting and making art. The program is just a lot of fun, and it's really great to see an image come together step by step. As for hardware, my Wacom tablet is an indispensable tool. A tablet is the key to comfortable painting on the computer. It just feels natural.

What tool / equipment do you wish you had?

Well now that I'm beginning to learn 3D I just wish I had a better PC. Those kinds of renderings need powerful hardware, which is all very expensive. But on the other hand, I do have a pretty good computer, and I know a lot of fellows who have to deal with less, so I can't complain.

What do you hope to accomplish with your art?

I hope to become a respected artist one day and to inspire a lot of people in doing what I do or what they do best. And, of course, I want to become a successful matte painter/CG artist and make a lot of good and beautiful movies! But for now, that's just a dream. Akajork over and out...



Deuces Wild

Chapter 14

by L. S. King

It was the planet; it had to be. Tristan didn't know what Zenos meant, or even if it was from a human language or some native tongue, but it had to mean 'bad luck.'

He'd wanted to discover the status of the Mordas, and who was in charge now—at least it seemed that was forthcoming. However, he hadn't wanted to find out with his hands bound and at the wrong end of a dozen weapons.

At least he knew that one merchant was in the Mordas' pocket to allow an ambush in his store. Or perhaps duress had forced his cooperation. Either way, it was an indication the Mordas were still powerful.

With a nudge from the muzzle of a particle beam rifle, he was encouraged to enter the office of the new leader of the Mordas.

The odor of cheap perfume hit him at the same time he noticed the frilly feminine décor. Irony twitched his lips as he saw the person sitting at the large desk dominating the room: Betts, the brothel owner who had helped them escape the Mordas last year.

She stood with a smirk. A good-looking woman, but she was past her prime despite trying valiantly to hide it with makeup. Her taste in clothes was still what it was last year, with an emphasis on displaying wares that were—or had been—for sale. Ample wares,

he admitted, his gaze flicking to her tempting cleavage.

One of her minions released the electronic cuffs.

Tristan rubbed his wrists as he met her eyes, wondering what she wanted with him. "Congratulations," he said evenly. "I see you have overcome your worries about who might fill the power vacuum."

She laughed, showing white teeth against her red lips. "A perfect solution." She waved at her men, who all lowered their weapons and left.

As the door shut, he said, "If you wanted to see me, why not merely send an invitation."

She walked toward him, swinging her hips, her eyes alight with whatever game she was playing. He had to get a handle on it—fast.

"MacCay—yes, I know your name now. And I know your reputation." An eyebrow quirked, and her smile became sly. "I thought this would save ever so much time."

"So, I'm here. What is it you want?"

Betts pursed her lips in a faux pout. "That's not too friendly. We were friends before. I thought that might continue."

Tristan tipped his head slightly, frowning. "We were allies, not friends."

She straightened slightly, her expression becoming rigid, which also emphasized the lines in her face. "Are you trying to make an enemy?"

"Merely clarifying the past." *What does this woman want? Men I can play, but women...* To find out what she wanted, he had to play her game, at least, to a point. Tristan took a breath. "It doesn't necessarily forestall friendship in the future."

Betts' resultant smile gave Tristan chills.

#

Slap slid off Príncipe's back and surveyed the mountains looming over him. His insides knotted. He was tired of the pain, of the horrible remembering and guilt. He'd seen the wary look in Tristan's eyes, wondering if he'd end his life. He'd thought about it, but didn't want that choice. The Zendians could help him—if he could bring himself to let them.

The stallion nudged his side. "I don't think the Zendians would mind you, boy, but you don't have to come with me."

Príncipe nudged him again and snorted. Slap patted his neck and, with a sigh, started

toward the pass. Príncipe followed.

Before long, shapes appeared in the distance and slowly melded into the bipedal forms of Zendians. The long, serene faces, covered with short hair, all gave him knowing looks. Could they know what happened? His face burned as shame filled him anew.

One approached, her body hair brown with black mottling. Slap recognized her. She was the one who nursed him when they'd brought him here after the Mordas had destroyed his home and left him for dead. Her name, as close as he could pronounce it, was Leefah.

Welcome home, Young One, she said softly.

The affection in her expression and voice broke Slap. He fell to his knees, his head bowed, as he sobbed uncontrollably.

#

Betts filled the goblets and gave one to Tristan as she sat on the sofa—a bit too close to him for his comfort. “Drink up. It’s very good.”

He sipped the wine and managed to swallow. Her taste in wine was as refined as her taste in clothes and perfume. He set the glass down on the table in front of them. “So, I take it you wish to do business?”

Betts looked up from under her lashes. “Most men aren’t usually so dispassionate with me.”

Tristan hesitated, suppressing a shudder, then leaned forward and picked up the goblet; it might be a useful shield. Time to dodge and

beguile. He essayed a smile. “I’m more astute than most men. They might merely see the very delightful surface. I see a”—*shark*—“very intelligent, resourceful woman.” He lifted the goblet in a salute.

Betts seemed gratified and leaned back. “So where is your quaint, backcountry friend?”

Did she know who Slap was? Tristan wasn’t sure what her direction was for the Mordas, but in the event she wanted the Separatists’ land, as her predecessor had, Slap might be in danger. The Mordas, by reputation, didn’t like leaving anyone alive who had crossed them.

Tristan posed no threat, being from off planet, but Slap—he had resisted the Mordas, fought them. And would again. “We parted company some time ago.”

“A pity. He blushed so prettily.”

Tristan’s eyebrows rose, and he pretended to take another sip of the horse urine—er, wine. “I would like to know about my ship, and any claims you might have on it.”

“I have no interest in it as former property of my organization. After all, I did help you get inside the port to steal it. Whatever problem you had with the Mordas is over. You needn’t be worried about that.”

“My problem wasn’t with the Mordas,” Tristan lied smoothly, “but with their buyers.”

“That’s why you stole those shipments? To get at the buyers?”

“Exactly.”

“And who were these buyers?”

Tristan narrowed his eyes and flashed a smile. “Oh, come now. You’re too intelligent to make me believe you don’t know.”

“Myers’ Mercs?”

He inclined his head.

“Nasty.” She gave a delicate, helpless-little-girl shiver. “And they have a reputation for double-crosses. Lyssel was a fool to deal with them. If you hadn’t killed him, it’s likely they would have.”

“I take it you aren’t interested in being one of their suppliers then.”

“No, although they’ve contacted me three times about it.” She leaned forward, her low-cut top displaying her enticing wares to good advantage. “I’m afraid of them, and I need someone who isn’t.”

Ah. This was the heart of it. Good. Now he had solid footing. He raised the goblet and smiled.

#

Stepping out of the doorway and into the sunshine, Tristan reexamined his interview. Betts’ offer of friendship had some positives, but Tristan knew he had to watch for the inevitable knife in the back. Nevertheless, for now, it served his purposes to play along. He had freedom to conduct his own business; take care of the final ship repairs needed on *Giselle* and replace the rest of his specialty items, confiscated by the Confeds and not easily obtained in more...legitimate territories.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about being

put in the position of fending off Myers' outfit. He liked choosing his own battles, but on the other hand, irritating Myers was on his list of favorite pastimes.

He paused, waiting for a flivver to pass, glancing at the shadows and niches out of habit, then crossed the wide boulevard. The merchant buildings lined each side, their awnings flapping in the breeze. Several guild buildings were nestled in among them. This upscale part of town allowed no mendicants or kiosks to litter the street. A skiff scurried by, piloted by a sun-bronzed slave in a loincloth, his master sitting under a canopy behind him.

A movement in a side street—a motion, as of a weapon steadied on a shoulder—caught his eye, and before he could think, he dove into a shoulder roll. An explosion sounded in his ears, and sand rained down. Screams rent the air from nearby shoppers.

Tristan uncovered his head and peered into the alley—empty. He gazed around the street. A crater now graced the spot he had been walking moments before. He rose, dusting his clothes, his injured leg aching again. Could Myers already know Tristan had been hired by Betts? Or was Betts double-dealing? Or—did yet someone else on this backwater planet want him dead?

Two of Betts' men ran toward him, their faces white.

He swung around and headed back to see Betts, trying not to limp.

#

"I don't need bodyguards."

"But look what almost happened." Betts' eyes were round. "You can't protect my interests if you're dead, you know."

"Look what didn't happen. Whoever was behind that was haphazard—and cheap. That weapon didn't even have auto-targeting. If that's indicative of their work, I'm in no real danger. I'm more inclined to believe it was a warning."

"From who?"

Whom. Never mind—think assassination not grammar. "I'll leave that to you. Unless he has spies—and don't count that out—Myers shouldn't know of our association yet. You want me alive, find out who that was."

Tristan spun on his heel and stalked out. Set her defensive, yes, but he wouldn't rely on her to find out who his assailant was.

#

The *tink-tink* from an incoming message interrupted Tristan's work. He slid himself out from under the bridge panel and hit the comm button. "Yes?"

Betts' voice filtered through, faux-demure as usual. "I've just had a call from Ben Myers. He is being very insistent. I need you to come by right away. I'm sending a rover for you."

Tristan stifled a sigh. "I understand."

As he stepped into the craft a few minutes later, he wondered if it was the same rover he and Slap stole escaping from the Mordas last

year. But he didn't think it would be polite to ask to examine the undersides for weapons fire.

Betts was alone in her office. She stood by her desk, her ringed fingers twisted together. "I told him it was an inconvenient time to talk. He should be calling again soon." She lifted a hand to indicate a tray filled with pastries on the table in front of the sofa. A wine bottle stood next to it. "Please, make yourself comfortable while we wait."

If not for her agitation, Tristan would wonder if Myers had called at all. He had the distinct feeling of being stalked. Some men might not mind, but his standards balked at her offering.

"Thank you, but I'd rather not get too comfortable. I have work to do on my ship, and too many distractions"—he flashed a brilliant smile at her—"lovely though they be, will set me behind schedule."

Betts' face grew lined with displeasure, but the comm chirped, making her jump. She gave Tristan a wide-eyed helpless female look. Did she play these feminine games with all her minions? If so, he wondered how long until she undermined her authority fatally.

He strode over and gestured toward her chair with his open hand, asking permission. She took a step away, and he sat, hitting the comm key.

Myers face appeared, and Tristan gave him a cool smile, waiting—due to time lag—for a reaction. He counted the seconds.

Finally, his old adversary blinked. "MacCay.

I thought you were dead. You must have the lives of a cat.”

“I always land on my feet. You should have realized that by now.”

Another pause, then Myers sniffed. “What are you doing on Zenos?”

“Disrupting your business. Just as I did last year.” Glee filled Tristan when, after the delay, Myers’ mouth dropped open.

“So it was you,” Myers’ spluttered. “I should have known. But—” He frowned. “If you were behind Lyssel’s death, and the downfall of the Mordas, what are you doing there now?” His face grew enlightened. “Ah. In bed with them now, are you? Or, shall I say, with her?”

Ugh. Never. “Let’s just say...I have interests here. And neither I, nor the Mordas, want your business. Consider Zenos off limits.”

He sat still during the time lag, keeping his face cold and challenging.

“And if I insist?” Myers asked after a few moments, his tone deadly.

Tristan let his icy-black gaze grow intense. “Then you deal with me. Not the Mordas. Me.” He paused for effect, his stare not wavering. “You know I don’t bluff. Do you call—or fold?”

Tristan had to fight the urge to fidget as he waited for this so-important reply.

At last, Myers face contorted. “I’ll bury you under your arrogance. I’m coming for you.” He began a recital of his opinion of Tristan’s birth, ancestry, and habits, which, although vile, were so unimaginative that Tristan nearly

yawned. With a bored flick of his finger, he disconnected.

He turned to see Betts shaking, her face red with fury. “You’ve just brought him down on us!”

“No, I brought him down on me. You wanted me to deal with him, you’d better be disposed to help.” He rose and bowed. “Now, excuse me, but I have some preparations to make.”

He departed, leaving her spluttering.

#

Slap sat on a low rock, staring into the fire. Leefah and two others sat with him. They hadn’t talked to him much at first, letting him grieve. But now they had begun again, as the last time. Telling him he could heal, if he would only do the one thing he couldn’t do.

It is the only way to begin healing, Young One, Leefah said.

But I don’t want to! How can you, when they killed Ol’ Pa?

Oh!pah is missed. We are grieved. But it is not our place to seek vengeance. Bitterness only destroys oneself. You must forgive those who have wronged you, or you will eat away your own soul. Look at the Avenger. His soul is dark, and he has done it to himself.

Slap straightened with a frown. *What Avenger? You said last year I should go into the city to meet with this avenging angel sent by your god. Well, I went, but I didn’t meet any angel.*

You did. He began his work, and you left with him. But now he returns, as was foreseen.

Tristan? Did they mean Tristan? An angel? He threw back his head and laughed aloud. Oh, if only he could tell his friend he was seen as an angel by the Zendians!

I don’t think my friend sees himself as an angel, he said with a chuckle.

Those chosen often do not. He has much pain, and has nurtured it into black hate for many. If you do not wish to eat your soul into an empty shell, you must learn to forgive. And then, perhaps, you can teach him, as well.

Dang, they never let him sidetrack a conversation. Leefah and the other two stared at Slap. He dropped his gaze and sighed. Forgive Lyssel? Forgive Nadi? He didn’t want to, but... he couldn’t go on this way, either. He slumped. *I...I don’t even know how.*

Leefah touched his arm. *That is a start.*

#

Tristan ate his meal, his back against the wall, as usual. This was the same courtyard restaurant he had come to last year with Slap the day they met. He stared at the seat across from him, imagining the cowboy sitting there, talking with his mouth full. *How was Slap doing now?*

Well, emotionally wounded though he was, Slap was alive and away from Tristan—away from the line of fire.

And thinking of line of fire, Tristan hadn’t

had any luck in finding out who had been behind that attack last week. Neither had the Mordas.

He would have attributed their lack of success on either incompetence, or on knowing already who was behind it. But given the fact he had been unsuccessful as well, that argument was nil.

But who was it? How could the attack be so ineffective, yet the cover up be so efficient? A paradox. Tristan didn't like paradoxes. He frowned, sipping his coffee. This puzzle clouded his mind—and he had to concentrate on the upcoming standoff; Myers was on his way.

He wouldn't put it past Myers to cause mass destruction just to get to Tristan; an image of a person with a particle beam rifle blasting a house to bits while trying to shoot a scurrying mouse flitted through his mind. But Myers, although not afraid to kill innocents, or shoot someone in the back, would not strike without first letting Tristan know he was there. He'd want to be face to face.

What Tristan had to do was make Myers focus on him and not on any standers-by.

#

Betts mouth dropped open. "You want me to what?"

"Betray me."

Betts stepped around a chair, one long, painted nail tapping her chin. "It seems your plan relies on the Mordas quite a bit."

"You asked for my help. Quite forcefully.

Don't tell me you don't intend to do your part."

Betts pursed her lips and continued walking around the room—stalking was more like it. "I had hoped you would merely emphasize to Myers that we weren't interested in any deals with him."

Tristan glared at her. "As head of the Mordas, 'emphasizing' is your job." He took a breath to bring his anger to a more manageable level. "My job—as defined by you—is to make sure Myers backs off. I know him; he doesn't back off."

"I know *of* him, which is why I didn't want to have anything to do *with* him." Betts sat and crossed her legs. "You probably don't believe it, but I *can* be ruthless. Myers, however—"

"You'd better worry about the Mordas, not Myers. You said you could be ruthless, but all you've shown me is a woman playing games. If your people hesitate in following you, it's my neck on the line. Wake up!"

Betts stood, her eyes snapping. "How dare you—"

"How dare *you*! Playing the helpless female might have been a ploy you could afford as a brothel madam, but it won't work now."

She lifted a hand to slap his face, but he grabbed her arm. She fought for a second then went limp, leaning against him—still playing games. "I'm not like that with them." She looked up, her eyes pleading. "Only with you."

Oh, please! "Save it. We don't have time. You say you can be ruthless. Show me ruthless."

Let's try a reversal of her gambit on her. Tristan lowered his head slightly, letting his cheek brush hers as he whispered in her ear, "I find that much more attractive."

Her eyebrow arched, and a smile slowly grew. "Tell me how you want me to betray you."

#

"You seem to have this all worked out," Betts said later, leaning back on the sofa. "But what about your ship? Don't you think it might get blown up, like last time?"

Tristan wished he could maneuver her to a table or desk. But the best he'd managed so far was being at the opposite end of this piece of furniture. He'd never danced around a woman so much in his life.

"No, I sold it." Not strictly true, but close enough. And hopefully that information would keep all eyes away from *Giselle*.

Her eyebrows rose. "Why?"

He gave a soft chuckle. "It really doesn't fit me. When this is all over, I'll be in the market for a small yacht."

"Who did you sell it to?"

"Some Separatists who wished to do their own cargo runs and avoid Merchant fees."

Betts laughed. "I now control the Merchants, and the Guilds too. You're pitting the Separatists against me?"

Also not strictly true. Some of the Merchants

were opposing the Mordas. Tristan had been busy and knew all about the links and ties of the local mob. But Betts didn't need to know what he knew about the local balance—or unbalance—of power. He shrugged. "I merely sold the ship. What happens from this point on isn't my concern. But, at the moment, I'd say you have more important concerns than one old freighter."

"True. Between you and Myers I have my hands full." Her lips twitched, fighting a smile.

Tristan wasn't going to acknowledge the double-entendre—or anything that might stray toward the inevitable hints of more than a business relationship. So far he'd deflected her advances with a business-first/play-later response.

But he'd better redirect the conversation. "Back to our plans. Myers will likely contact you when he—"

Fwoom! The door blasted into flaming pieces. Tristan dove over the coffee table and toward a side room. He shut the door and looked around. No exit but the window, covered with iron bars.

To catch up on previous episodes of the adventures of Slap and Tristan, visit: <http://loriendil.com/DW.php>

Deuces Wild is dedicated to the memory of

my best friend; my inspiration for an enduring friendship...

<http://loriendil.com/Starsky/>

L. S. KING

*A science fiction fan since childhood, L.S. King has been writing stories since her youth. Now, with all but one of her children grown, she is writing full-time. She has developed a sword-and-planet series tentatively called **The Ancients**. The first book is finished, and she has completed rough drafts of several more novels as well.*

*She serves on the editorial staff of **The Sword Review**, is also their Columns Editor, and writes a column for that magazine entitled "Writer's Cramps" as well. She is also one of the Overlords, a founding editor, here at Ray Gun Revival.*

She began martial arts training over thirty years ago, and owned a karate school for a decade. When on the planet, she lives in Delaware with her husband, Steve, and their youngest child. She enjoys garden-

ing, soap making, and reading. She also likes Looney Tunes, the color purple, and is a Zorro aficionado, which might explain her love for swords and cloaks.

The RGR Time Capsule

July 15 - July 31, 2007

Sci-Fi news from the *Ray Gun Revival* forums

RGR DATE: JULY 19, 2007

Military prepping actual rayguns

<http://raygunrevival.com/Forum/viewtopic.php?t=1262>

<http://blog.wired.com/defense/2007/07/prepping-for-a-.html>

No one has quite figured out how to put together a battlefield ray gun -- yet. But that isn't stopping the U.S. military from getting ready.

The Air Force Research Lab is "conducting research... to accurately predict the effects of lasers on various threat targets. Laser vulnerability assessments on space, tactical/ground, and missile, systems, subsystems, and components shall be completed to accurately predict the consequences of lasers interaction with these targets."

The Naval Surface Warfare Center is launching "scientific investigations into the effects of Laser Weapons on marine mammals." And it's looking to "leverage of existing and/or Commercial Off-The-Shelf (COTS) items into militarily useful laser weapon systems within two to three years."

RGR DATE: JULY 31, 2007

Most detailed pictures of Earth ever seen

<http://raygunrevival.com/Forum/viewtopic.php?t=1302>

These spectacular images are the most detailed true colour pictures of the Earth that we have ever seen.

The clear images, released by NASA, were pieced together from observations taken from a satellite of the land surface, oceans, sea ice and clouds.

Using a collection of these satellite-based

observations, NASA scientists have stitched together months of observations of the earth's surface and combined them to create a colourful mosaic of our living planet.

RGR DATE: JUNE 30, 2007

From ComicCon, some Joss Whedon movie tidbits

<http://raygunrevival.com/Forum/viewtopic.php?t=1297>

<http://www.aintitcool.com/node/33489>

From the Joss Whedon panel:

Whedon just finished writing "the horror film to end all horror films—literally" with fellow "Buffy"/"Angel" alumnus Drew Goddard. It's called "Cabin in the Woods." (Goddard, you'll recall, also wrote J.J. Abrams' mysterious upcoming "Cloverfield" movie.)

RGR DATE: JUNE 23, 2007

ReBoot coming to the silver screen?

<http://raygunrevival.com/Forum/viewtopic.php?t=1279>

This source at AICN is less than underwhelmed, but I'm STOKED! ReBoot was the first full length, completely computer animated TV series, and I loved the storylines and all CGI rendering. And in a weird sort of way, ReBoot has a tie-in with Transformers, which just made it to the big screen the week of July 4th. After ReBoot, the creative company that developed the show, Mainframe Entertainment, worked on two Transformers shows, Beast Wars Transformers, and Beast Machines Transformers.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ReBoot>

