

DARK STAR PANORAMA

SHADOWS
IN THE
STARS

T.W.M. ASHFORD

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BOOK 1

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Cover design by Tom Ashford

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CHAPTER ONE

The flames of wax candles flickered like snake tongues in the damp gloom. Short-lived shadows stalked across rough walls of crag and rock. Somewhere deep in the subterranean labyrinth, a stalactite dripped lazily into a murky pool.

Hooded figures shuffled through the darkness.

They chanted together, slow and deep in their throats, pairing ominous harmonies. Their long, desert-brown robes draped behind them, brushing tracks through the dust on the tunnel floor. Their hands were clasped together in prayer beneath their pendulous sleeves.

A six-legged lizard jerked its head up as it heard their order coming, then slithered away through a crack in the nearest boulder.

Into a grand chamber they poured, a stream of monks marching two abreast. Ancient statues carved from red rock stood around the edge of the cavern, each a dozen metres tall. The procession circled the floor counter-clockwise, spiralling slowly inwards like a ruptured starship tumbling towards a black hole, until the last two monks entered and the chamber was full. Their throaty chant ceased instantly. The only sound remaining was that of large braziers crackling.

Precisely in the centre of the chamber was a huge gemstone.

It was the size and shape of an ostrich egg, one whose shell sparkled as if it were cut from a giant diamond. The flames of the braziers kissed its sharp, uneven surface. Their amber light was reflected across the stoic faces of its captivated audience in sparkling, shimmering waves.

Their collective attention remained on the ovoid jewel even as the final member appeared in the alcove high above them. This was the High Priest, the most senior amongst their order, and he alone was hoodless. His skin was the colour of desert sand. His leathery, white-wisped head was host to a thick beard of fleshy tendrils. Clasped in his wrinkled hand was an ornate golden sceptre topped with an equally golden medallion. A beast resembling a wyvern adorned its face.

He spread his arms wide, holding the sceptre aloft as if it were a spear, and spoke in a surprisingly fierce voice for his years. The words followed a dark, drawn-out rhythm. They belonged to a language long extinct. But everybody present knew what the words signified, even if nobody could translate them directly anymore.

Collectively, they were the Rites of Skinesh.

They were *tradition* – one carried out by generation after generation since time immemorial.

The High Priest finished his speech, then nodded.

“Proceed,” he announced in his local tongue.

Two of the hooded monks stepped forward from the silent spiral and, grabbing the long wooden handles of the silky stretcher on which the jewel rested, lifted the priceless artefact off the rocky floor. The rest closed ranks, and together they carefully marched out of the chamber through another ancient lava tunnel. Satisfied with proceedings, the High Priest turned and vanished from his alcove.

Again their order chanted, their haunted voices carried alongside the egg down rock tube after rock tube, until eventually the dim candlelight died and their lungs tasted cleaner air...

A stage outside the hypogean temple. Wooden boards neatly arranged under the shadow of a crooked outcrop supported by eight chestnut-

coloured pillars. Beyond the stage, hundreds – perhaps thousands – more believers watched and waited under the myriad stars. Midnight waves could be heard crashing and retreating over the nearby shore.

The monks spread out to fill the rear of the stage – all except the two carrying the artefact, who continued onward to a lonely plinth set in the stage's centre. It was at this time that the High Priest joined them, eliciting a hushed shiver of excitement through the patient crowd.

“Friends, family, citizens of Keet,” he announced in a voice far more creaky than that in which he'd performed the sacred rites. “Thank you for gathering here tonight. For two weeks we have mourned the loss of our blessed krustallos. For two weeks we have fasted, as the scripture dictates. And all the while, the Purple Sunset continues to consume.”

A general murmur rippled through the audience. Many raised their heads to the heavens. Even in the late evening, a dark, foreboding bruise in the sky could be seen blocking out a stretch of stars.

“Yet we must not fret,” he continued, raising a wrinkled palm for quiet. “Our Great Protector may have departed this world, but from death, life may begin anew.”

He stepped aside. The two monks set down the stretcher and delicately transferred the jewel to the cushioned plinth. The crowd held its collective breath. Once set, the High Priest removed the medallion from the top of his sceptre and, with his back to his audience, activated the plinth's locking mechanism. Four clamps contracted and secured the twinkling egg in position.

The High Priest carefully reattached the medallion to his sceptre before spinning around with his arms raised and a radiant smile spread across his face.

“The Cradle of the Krustallos is set. Let the Sunrise Celebrations begin!”

The crowd erupted in rapturous cheers and applause. Lights bloomed all across the city, dispelling the darkness. Oil lanterns, strings of fairy lights, neon signs on store fronts. Somebody even released a swarm of fireflies into the dusky sky. Musical groups launched into lively performances; steel

drums fought to be heard over the screech of electronic synths. Grills were lit. Saloons handed out free drinks. Citizens danced and embraced in the streets. Even a few of the younger acolytes were tempted into throwing back their hoods and joining the revelry.

High Priest Szaladar watched his neighbours party with great fondness. He knew many of them by name. The parties, the pageantry. After the miserable fortnight through which they'd just suffered, the people of Keet needed this.

He turned back to the jewel and ran a gentle hand over its crystalline exterior, imagining he could feel a warmth within. The egg was close to hatching. Two weeks was all it took. It would be the only egg to hatch in his lifetime. A krustallos lived for centuries. He was lucky to officiate a Sunrise ceremony at all.

Somebody let off a firework above the temple. Szaladar jumped, alarmed, then laughed as he watched the shower of yellow sparks descend over the city.

Finally, he thought, all was good on the quiet planet of Nasako once more.

CHAPTER TWO

Sheni Dupont slammed his fist down on the chipped wooden table, grinned heartily, and asked, “Another round, Gecki?”

“We can’t afford it.”

“That wasn’t the question. Do you want one?”

The reptilian lounging in the chair opposite him scratched her scaly cheek with a long, black claw, and shrugged.

“Yeah, screw it. Put it on the tab.”

Sheni clicked his fingers in triumph, pushed back his chair and rose unsteadily to his feet. He wasn’t drunk yet. Nowhere near, in fact. They didn’t have the credits for *that*. It was just that the floor of the bar was so damn uneven...

Still the best port in the galaxy by a country parsec, though.

The Corpse & Casket was a one-stop shop for pirates, thieves and raiders alike. Presently in a lazy orbit around the Baratarian star, the station offered a place to dock and refuel one’s ship, louse-infested accommodation for desperate hitchhikers, dubious avenues for offloading particularly ‘hot’ cargo – and, of course, the titular watering hole. The beers weren’t all that great, but they were cheap and they never stopped flowing.

Like many of the regulars, Sheni lived aboard his ship. But even with the *Silver Hart* docked only a couple of hundred metres from where he presently stood, the Corpse & Casket felt like a home away from home.

He jerked his head back just in time to dodge a glass bottle being lobbed across the room.

Not that he'd ever let any of these reprobates into his *actual* house, of course, should he ever find himself able to afford one...

The Corpse & Casket welcomed all sorts. Literally. The galaxy was occupied by thousands of alien species of varying intelligence, and practically all of them had less desirable denizens who visited the port from time to time. As a humanoid – let alone an actual *human* – Sheni was hilariously outnumbered. Diminutive Scrap Rats yapped and scratched themselves in the corners. Hulking rhinoceros creatures called Alpha Rhoden put enormous pressure on creaking chairs already on the cusp of becoming firewood. An eight armed cephalopod played a dangerous knife game with a cyber-augmented insectoid. A pair of red-horned beasts with black, leathery wings hung upside-down from the rafters, tittering and sucking at blood-packs.

There was no denying the fact that most of the bar's patrons were cutthroats and murderers. Even those in possession of a few moral principles weren't afraid to disable a starship's thrusters and render its crew stranded in the cold void if it meant lining their pockets with a few credits. Sheni didn't consider himself remotely in the same league as them. His crew of small-time spacers simply didn't fit in anywhere else.

Hell, half the lunatics present would probably kill him and Gecki if they thought they'd be any profit in it. Not inside the Corpse & Casket, though. Even a pirate bar has rules.

Sheni reached the bar having navigated an overturned chair and a puddle of vomit. Overhead, neon signs for various beverage brands flickered on and off beside the mounted head of a Queflian sand shark. Hundreds of flasks, vials and bottles suitable for dozens of different metabolisms lined the ramshackle shelves behind. Seven drunken fools sat with various degrees of

success along the counter. He squeezed between two comatose regulars he assumed still drew breath.

“Hey, Copper John. Two beers, yeah?”

The bartender squeaked and wheezed down the counter towards him. Copper John was an automata, a sentient robot who'd killed his old master and gone on the run a few decades prior. His four long arms full of gears and pistons made pouring drinks a breeze. His brass head was devoid of facial features, and he wore a necklace of teeth and playing cards to differentiate himself from the taps and pipes. Newer visitors sometimes assumed he was a pushover on account of being a synthetic, but Copper John had been known to shoot troublemakers with the shotgun he kept stashed behind the barrels. Nobody could remember who originally built the station, but if anyone could be said to own the Corpse & Casket, it was him.

“Two beers?” he replied in a voice like a fax machine. “You still haven't paid for your last two yet. Last two hundred, more like.”

“Come on, John.” Sheni reached over the counter and punched the automata lightly on the metal shoulder. “It all goes on the tab, doesn't it?”

“A tab isn't a high score, Sheni. You have to pay it off eventually.”

“And I will. Eventually. You know we're good for it.”

Commotion broke out at the other end of the room. Copper John extended his mechanical neck for a better look. One of the elephantine Alpha Rhoden had stood up from her table and was dangling a small green alien above it by one of its spindly legs.

“Somebody had better take responsibility for this jelly bean before I pin it to the bloody wall,” she grumbled.

Sheni groaned.

“Stop unscrewing the table bolts, Alan,” he shouted from the bar, “and go sit next to Gecki.”

The Alpha Rhoden dropped the olive green creature onto the table, sending empty beer bottles and burnt-out cigarette butts cascading onto the wooden floor. Sheni winced. Alan leapt down and hurried across the crowded room to Gecki, a dopey smile plastered across his green face. The

alien was only a couple of feet tall and shaped like a melon that someone had squished at the sides. A pair of large eyes bulging out from the top of his torso stared in opposite directions to one another. Nobody knew what species Alan belonged to, or even what his real name was. The gibbering idiot had been on the *Silver Hart* back when Gecki stole it, and he'd been an inseparable part of the crew ever since.

Sheni shook his head in exasperation.

"Better make that three beers," he said to Copper John, flashing an apologetic smile.

"Two beers and a mudberry juice," the cantankerous automata replied, "coming right up..."

The white-haired patron closest to Sheni shivered out of his drunken stupor. All of the humanoid's limbs had been hacked off and replaced with robotic prosthetics over the years. One of his eyes was a cybernetic camera lens, and the other was a black eight-ball that rolled around in its socket uncontrollably. The pensioner tried disembarking his stool and almost toppled over backwards.

"Woah there, Old Guntho." Sheni helped him down. "Careful. I think somebody needs to go sleep this one off, eh?"

"Thank you, young man," the ancient pirate croaked. *Young man?* Sheni was a shade past forty. "Most raiders these days – they ain't got no respect for their elders, you know?"

"I hear you," Sheni said kindly as he aimed Old Guntho towards the door. The decrepit cyborg was a regular at the Corpse & Casket. Surely he had to sleep *somewhere* besides the bar. "You got a room at Peggi's?"

The leathery pirate gave Sheni a mechanical thumbs-up and tottered out of the bar. Sheni thanked Copper John for the drinks and carried them back to Gecki's table. Alan sipped his juice through a metal straw pocked with rust. He seemed to enjoy it. It was hard to tell sometimes, what with the little weirdo only having the one facial expression.

"Okay, Gecki." Sheni pointed his mug at her. "Now that I've got a fresh drink in my hand, tell me – how broke are we, exactly?"

“We were broke before. Now we’re the bits and pieces dumped in the trash.”

Alan may have been forever grinning, but Gecki had a frown chiseled into a face of cold granite. She was a six-foot-eight bipedal reptilian – a Eureptix, to be precise – capable of tearing off a man’s arm with a single tug. Her currently mint-green scales could shift colour and render her almost invisible and, unlike most of her victims, she could regrow lost limbs. Her species had practically evolved to be thieves. Sheni was keenly aware that her frosty demeanour was the primary reason why the other pirates at the Corpse & Casket refrained from picking fights with him. That, and he wasn’t afraid to get a round in. She was nearly blind in her left eye, which had lost its yellow colour and turned a cloudy grey.

Even with a translator chip planted in the back of his neck, Sheni couldn’t pronounce her true Eureptix name. He wasn’t born with the right combination of vocal chords and pheromone glands. Gecki was the closest most species could manage without drenching the angry lizard in phlegm.

“So we’ve got no credits left at all, is that what you’re saying? Even the emergency stash is empty?”

“It’s been empty for half a cycle now, you idiot. You wasted the last of it gambling on the holo-races.”

“Hey.” Sheni looked down into his mug as he drank. “Those races were meant to be rigged...”

“Yes, against you! And only the gods know how we’re gonna clear the debt we incurred paying off the bookies...”

“Ah, stop worrying about everything so much.” Sheni leaned back and put his boot up on the table. “We’ll figure something out. We always do.”

Gecki hissed something derogatory under her breath, which Sheni chose to ignore. The lizard needed to loosen up. That’s why they’d come all the way out to the Baratarian system, wasn’t it? To escape the up-tight rules and regulations of the wider Ministerium, not fret about petty loan sharks.

“Did I hear you’re in need of some quick credits?” asked a sheepish voice behind their backs.

Sheni and Gecki groaned in unison. Alan gurgled contentedly.

“What do you want, Two-Toe Tim?” Sheni glanced over his shoulder. “I swear, this had better not be another of your get-rich-quick schemes...”

The short man standing behind him smelled of stale beer and moth balls. He was dressed in standard raider rags and a leather vest-jacket not dissimilar to Sheni’s own. His small, mousey demeanour gave people the impression he might accidentally slip through the cracks in the planks beneath his well-worn boots.

“Hey, don’t be like that, guys.” Two-Toe Tim looked between them uneasily. “Us humans have got to stick together. Ain’t that right, Sheni?”

He wasn’t wrong. Ever since the evacuation of Earth, *Homo sapiens* had practically become an endangered species. Two-Toe Tim was certainly the only other human pirate Sheni had come across over the years. Most of their kind were quite content to settle down in the colonies on New Terra.

“How come you’ve only got two toes, anyway?” Gecki rasped. “Frostbite get them, or something?”

“I haven’t got two toes,” Tim sighed despondently. “I’m *missing* two toes. You know, from the usual ten. Usual for a human, I mean,” he hurriedly added, sweating under the heat of Gecki’s glare. “Lost them in a shipyard accident, if you must know. Dropped a skip drive on them. And it’s just Tim, by the way. Tim is absolutely fine.”

“Come on then, Two-Toes,” Sheni said. “Out with it. What’s this harebrained idea of yours?”

Tim hesitated for a moment, then hurried around to the other side of the table and sat down hard on the one remaining chair.

“Have either of you heard of the planet Nasako?” he asked.

“No,” Sheni replied.

“Yes,” Gecki responded, glancing at her crewmate. “Small rock out in the Morg system. Not a place where much happens.”

“Exactly,” Two-Toe Tim said enthusiastically. “Which is why it’s the perfect place for a score. Minimal Ministerium oversight, you know? And the locals are piss-poor. Barely any municipal security to worry about.”

“It’ll take a quarter-tank of fuel to get to Nasako.” Gecki crossed her arms. “There’s plenty worth stealing that’s a lot closer. This target of yours must be pretty valuable.”

“Oh, it is.” Tim leaned across the table conspiratorially. “We’re talking about an egg made entirely of taaffeite crystal.”

Gecki reared her head back and hissed.

“Oh, gods. Not another egg. Botching that Chiboraan job almost got us killed.”

“It’s not a *real* egg,” Tim insisted. “Least, I don’t think it is. Just a really ornate one used for ceremonies. You know, like a Fabergé Egg,” he said to Sheni. “Remember them?”

“Course I do,” Sheni replied, his interest piqued. “Russian jewellery made for the Imperial family, right? Emperor-level stuff. Insanely valuable,” he added for Gecki’s benefit.

“Taaffeite crystal does fetch a high price on the black market,” Gecki mused. “And this thing’s easy to grab, you say?”

“Displayed outside for anyone to take,” Tim replied. “It’s part of some ceremony that takes place every couple hundred years, or whatever. Just a few local guards on watch, nothing you can’t handle. Like you said, it’s a backwater planet. The Nasakoans are a very trusting people.”

“So why do you need us?” Sheni asked. “Why not go grab it yourself?”

“Don’t have a ship, do I? Been stuck on this blasted station for weeks now. So, what do you say? Fifty-fifty split?”

“You’re having a laugh, aren’t you?” Sheni snorted. “All you’ve done is pass on what you heard from someone else.”

“Finder’s fee, ain’t it? Three ways, then. Thirty-three point three percent each.”

“We have four crew members,” Gecki snapped, jabbing a claw at Alan. “Counting this green goon and our pilot.”

Alan reached the end of his juice and made a slurping sound with his straw that continued until Gecki pulled it from his mouth.

“Fine,” Tim said through gritted teeth. “An even split of the profits between everyone on board, and you let me join your team.”

Sheni almost spat out his drink.

“No freaking way.” Gecki laughed. “We’re barely keeping ourselves afloat as it is. There’s no space for anyone else on the *Silver Hart*, not even with this take of yours.”

“Presuming the rumours you’ve heard are true,” Sheni added.

“Exactly.” Gecki leaned back and picked at her teeth with a claw. “We’d be taking all the risk. Eighty-five to fifteen percent split in our favour, and we drop you off wherever you want after we’re done. Final offer.”

They waited patiently while Tim’s jaw clenched and his eyes flickered between the two of them. Sheni suspected he cared more about being assigned to a permanent crew than what his share of the credits would be.

“Don’t want this score? Fine.” Two-Toe Tim suddenly stood up with his hands raised in defeat. “I’ll take it to Thunderskull instead. I just thought I’d give a fellow human first dibs.”

“Woah, now.” Sheni pulled Tim back down. “Steady on, man. Is your head screwed on tight? Thunderskull’s madder than a Krettelian in a cage. You don’t want to get mixed up with him.”

“You think I want to get mixed up with *anyone* here?” Tim hissed quietly. “That’s why I came to you first. Thunderhead’s no worse than the rest of these guys, is he?”

“You want a bet? Only last week, he spaced a guy for getting lost on his way back from shore leave. Could have just marooned his sorry ass, but no – Thunderskull waited until the engineer was back on board and then shoved him out the airlock once they reached orbit. The guy’s a murderous psychopath, man.”

“So? *You’ve* both killed people.”

“He’s right,” Gecki said with a lethargic shrug.

“No, he’s not!”

“What do you call blowing up all those Prymalis attack ships, then?”