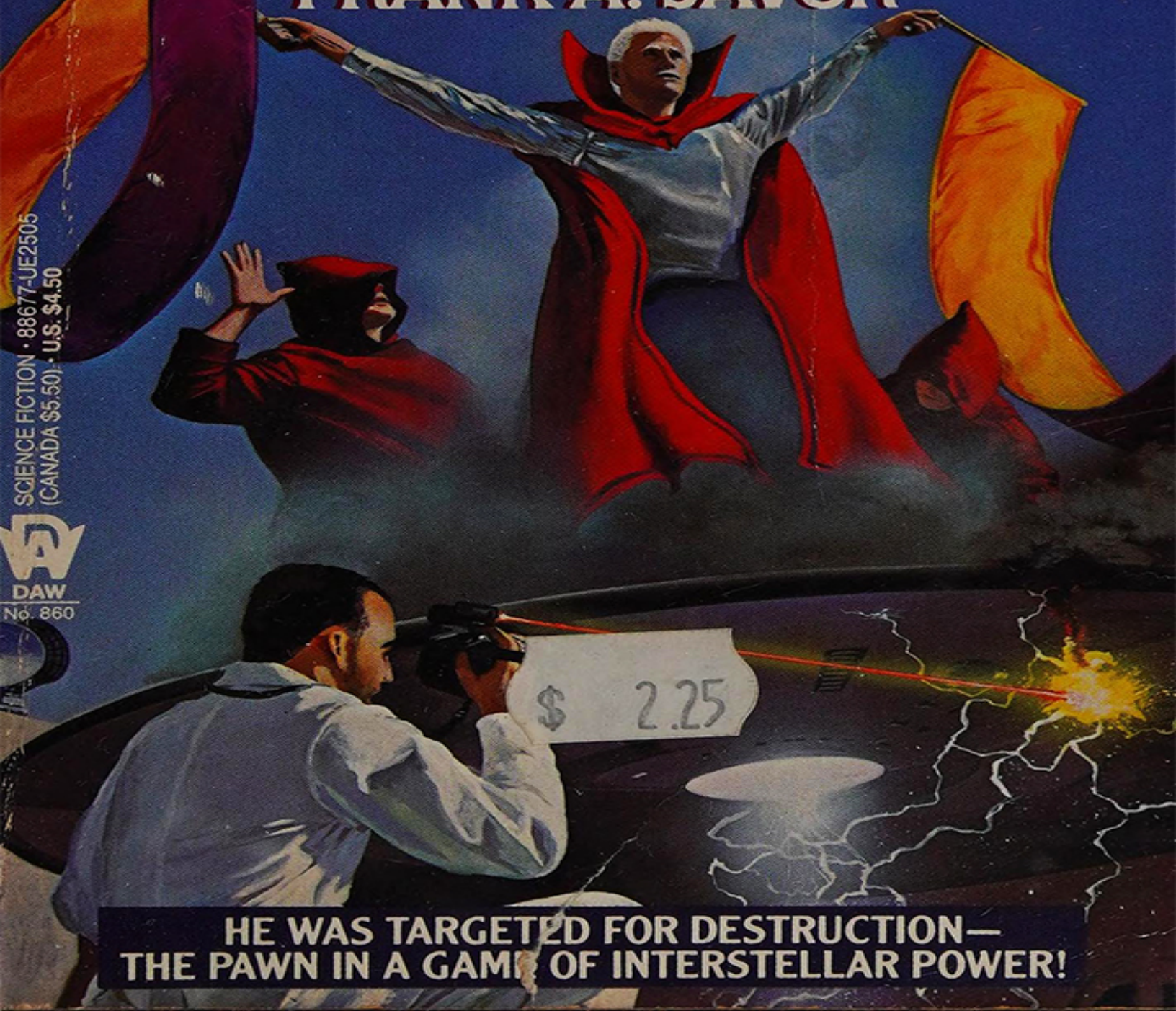


THE RIM-WORLD™ LEGACY

AND BEYOND
FRANK A. JAVOR

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No. 860



HE WAS TARGETED FOR DESTRUCTION—
THE PAWN IN A GAME OF INTERSTELLAR POWER!



Jerry eBooks

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PICTURE OF DEATH—

I pointed the camera down and squeezed the release to check its operation. At the same moment, I heard the thin, almost inaudible passage of the masher beam from a sniper's weapon, and my body, remembering its combat-learned lessons, dropped me flat. Yet even as I went down I saw, following the pointing of my camera, a snaking, living gash forming itself in the garish pattern of the floor of the magician's platform.

In a flash of understanding as brilliant as only hindsight can be, I realized that someone had replaced my photographic laser with a high-intensity killer unit— and I couldn't shut it off!

I fought to keep the camera from slipping out of my grip. Fought to hold on to it and keep it pointed away from the now roiling, screaming mass of children around me.

Fighting the laser beam, and swearing at the animals who, to kill a man, would choose a time and a weapon that, like a hose that could not be turned off, would spray its death at the youngsters pressing close around him. . . .

DAW Books Presents Frank A. Javor's
Rim-World™ Novels:

THE RIM-WORLD™ LEGACY *And Beyond*

SCOR-STING

THE ICE BEAST

**THE
RIM-WORLD™
LEGACY
AND BEYOND**

FRANK A. JAVOR

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THE RIM-WORLD^(TM) LEGACY

HEAVY, HEAVY

MOIRE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

“Moire” was to have been Pike’s second short adventure on Poldrogi. It metamorphosed, instead, into THE RIM-WORLD® LEGACY and his first appearance in a novel. His first encounter with print was in the short story “Heavy, Heavy.”

Prologue

I'm six-feet-four, weigh two hundred pounds, and swim about as well as a porous rock. AH the same, I pressed myself down into the black water the sparse weeds sprang from, listening.

Listening. Straining my ears in the heavy darkness until I thought the skin on the back of my neck would pop. Knowing that the rise and fall of the sounds those who were after me were making was not in their nearness or distance, but in me.

Warily, swearing inside at the way the strength in my hands was coming and going, I started working away at the base of a tall reed.

Bending it. Pulling it down to me slowly, slowly, all the time aware to the point of torture that in the night-vision glasses the men tracking me were sure to be wearing, a movement, unless it be heartbreakingly slow, would show as a sudden flaring of bright yellow against the dull red of the overall background stillness.

"Pike," someone shouted, his voice coming at a low point in my hearing, but I could make out my own name well enough.

"Pike. Come out. Give yourself up. Don't make us come in after you."

Give myself up. There were children's and women's voices mingled with those of the men after me, and the sound of them added that thin frosting of urgency to my predicament that had me fighting to hold at bay the

unreasoning temptation to break and run. Break and run and evade my pursuers by sheer animal speed.

Sheer animal speed against the animal thing after me. The thing that brought its women and children with it to the hunt. The thing that by this act revealed itself to me to be no policeman's posse that might be content to capture and to hold me. The thing that cried out to me to give myself up to it.

The thing that was a howling mob.

Panic tried to force its treacherous way into the racing of my mind.

I fought to hold it in check and kept pulling the reed down slowly, fearful that it would slip from my weakening hands and the motion of its snapping erect betray my location as surely as if I'd sent up a flare.

Fighting, for the same reason, the urge to shake my head to ease the prickle of the old scar I could feel throbbing on the top of my balding head. The scar that was a souvenir of the Second Police Action. Thin, almost invisible, it seemed to have a sensor of its own that made it tingle when it thought I was about to head into something that, if I was lucky, I'd live to regret.

And now at last I had the reed flat in the water and hidden, close to my body.

I began twisting it. *Slowly, slowly, but hurry, before they can rig and bring up the heat detectors that will use the warmth of your own body as a beacon to home in on.*

Twisting the reed. Swearing silently at my hands and their unsure grip that was making of so simple a task so formidable a project. Fighting to keep my lungs from gasping their air and make tremble the high grasses around me. Make them tremble and the motion betray me to my pursuers.

I felt the reed weakening and now it was free in my grasp.

I strangled my gasp of relief and, forcing myself to wait until I felt my grip on it firming, I broke off the tip. Then, raising one end to my mouth, I blew into it.

I blew, feeling my cheeks puff out and straining until the pinpoints of light danced red and yellow in my eyeballs and the strength of my lungs ebbed away.

Nothing.

The reed was plugged. *Membranes crossing its diameter.*

Pressed down in the chill water but sweating, I groped in the darkness for another reed. Thin, but sturdy.

I found one, pulled it down and worked it free as carefully as I'd done the first one even though now I could hear, dimly, and more clearly, and dimly again as my hearing phased in and out, the unmistakable beat of approaching hover-craft.

Hover-craft, heat-detecting units jerry-rigged on long cables to hang below them and sweep close to the water in their search for the warmth of my body. My head, my face would be enough.

Hover-craft, more than one from the sound, and sooner than I'd expected. They must be units commandeered from the spaceport that was the chief reason for *Poldrogi's* existence. The planet's city police could not have been cleared to move outside their jurisdiction so quickly. The men in those hover-craft would be as free of official control as the mob on the ground.

Hurry now, hurry, but do not move with anything but agonizing slowness lest your motion flare brightly yellow in the night-vision glasses of your hunters.

Using the thinner reed as a reamer, I poked into the larger one, first from one end and then from the other.

Again I blew into it and this time my breath was unobstructed. The inner passage of the long reed was clear.

Carrying my newmade tube, and stopping only when the drag of the water threatened to wrench it from my fingers, I groped in the darkness for deeper water. Oddly enough, even though no one, not even the SpaceNav experts back in my service days, had been able to teach me to swim, I had no particular fear

of deep water. And even if I had, the racket of hover-craft, now clear in the night behind me, would have given me reason enough to press on.

From the sound of things, it was plain to me that I'd just about had all the time I was going to get to find out how deep the semi-swamps that were the lakes of *Poldrogi* could become.

I found a clump of weeds that felt a little thicker than the rest and, blowing through my reed to clear it, put one end among them so that it might the better escape the notice of my pursuers.

The other end of my reed I put into my mouth and, pinching my nose between my fingers as best as their phasing strength would let me, I let myself settle down, the black water closing over my head, plugging my ears with its characteristic roar, until I sat on the silted and treacherous-feeling bottom.

They would not come after me, I hoped, once they'd lost me in their night-vision glasses, until there was daylight enough to see me by.

I was lucky, I suppose, that this was *Poldrogi* and not Linedo or Parsi or any one of the more fashionable tourist planets that made of their scenery a feature, flooding it with lights that came on automatically at the approach of a human.

But *Poldrogi* was, after all, only a transit world. A place to transship cargoes or wait out starship connections and aside from the anticrime lights in the spaceport city itself, its Council of Peers was not one of waste power on lighting up the countryside.

All I could do for now was wait, knowing that the hovercraft, their heat detectors dangling beneath them, were crisscrossing over my head. Wait in the pulsing water and hope that my breath, traveling the length of the reed I'd selected, would emerge in a wisp cool enough to escape discovery.

A search robot, I knew, would not be commandeered, like a hover-craft, and sent in after me. They were designed to keep the starships and their cargo holds clear of stowaways and other unwanted visitors and would not function

in deep water. But someone might think to search over their bills of lading in the hope that there might be in one of the shipments an android hunter on its way to a sporting world. And I could not hide from myself the knowledge that if it were activated and sent to ferret me out, I would stand no chance against a thing that only *looked* like a man.

I pushed the unsettling thought out of my mind. To give it play now, when I was over my head in water, trying to ignore the unseen things that bumped and slithered against me in the blackness, could only build the panic that would destroy me.

No. For now the only thing to do is to wait. Wait and try to think of how you got into this predicament in the first place. Then, maybe you will be better able to figure out what to do when you get out and away from here. If you get out and away from here. If. . . .

Stop. Stop thinking along those lines. Think of the girl.

The girl. She had been by the open transhaus window when I stepped in through the corridor door.

Chapter One

Poldrogi.

I came awake to the sound of a pounding on the panel at the side of my head and the sight of a sterile blue-green surface so close to my face as to seem to be pressing down upon me.

Bunk. I'm in my bunk, but I feel heavy; planet heavy. The grav units . . . something wrong with the ship's grav units. Trouble . . . the pounding in my ear. . .

And then I knew where I was. I shook my head and blinked, trying to clear my sleep-clogged nose and throat of the acrid chemical bite of the disinfected wash of air.

There were no grav units for something to be wrong with. The pull on my body was a natural one. I was not in my old bunk aboard the SpyEye IV, but in a *Poldrogi* transhaus sleep cubicle, and the pounding was being done by someone in the corridor outside my coffinlike enclosure.

I slid back the thin plastic panel. "What?" I said. "What do you want? My time's not up." I fumbled in the wall pocket behind my head for my wrist-chrono. "I've got two . . . maybe three hours. . ."

The fat man standing in the corridor showed me his handmade *Poldrogi* teeth. "Lady to see you," he said, giving the first word the local accent that made it sound like "lead-y."

“Upstairs. My office,” he said full into my face.

Lord. Do they even make their transhaus managers eat those miserable disinfectants?

I stared at his fat face peering in at me. Who knew I was here? Who even knew I was alive? Lady, he’d called her, and I knew transit-world locals well enough to know that if that’s what he called her, then that was what she was, and not some corridor-walker trying to drum up a little trade with an ex-SpaceNav serviceman.

And with starship passage rates being figured not by the person but by the pound, anyone with *his* heft couldn’t be anything but a local. Space warp technique or no, it still took power and money to move a weight from one place to another. It would take plenty of both to move him.

“A lady?” I said. “For me? Are you sure?”

“She ask for pho-tographer. You it.”

Photographer. Then she’d asked for me, not by name, but by business. It could mean she had a job she wanted done and it could also mean that she wasn’t too sure how *simon-pure* an assignment it was. A lady with a clean photo job in mind didn’t go down into a spaceport transhaus to find someone to do it for her.

She wasn’t too sure about it, and she was looking for a photographer who needed the money.

I was a photographer . . . and I needed the money. Lord, did I need the money. I could at least listen to what she had to say.

I pushed the panel all the way back and slid out of my cubicle. “Thanks,” I said to the fat manager. “Thank you for calling me.”

He showed me his hand-carved teeth again. “No thanks. You only one here. I tell lady you come.”

I watched him shuffle away from me. He was broad, but then the corridor wasn’t any wider than it needed to be and he just about filled it with his beam.

The scuffs, the crushed shorts, the T shirt he had on may have had some color to them once, but the constant washing, the sterilizing that transhaus regulations called for had long ago bleached it out until now they looked to have been dipped in drying and faded blood.

It was clean, all right. It was cheap. But it wasn't fancy.

I snaked my travel jumpsuit out of the mesh bag at the back of the cubicle, shook it to free it of the wrinkles it had picked up, stepped into it. The zipper was stiff, its tab skimpy, but I managed to work it closed and stood for a moment wondering if it would look better if I took my cameras with me or left them until I'd heard what the woman upstairs wanted of me.

I snorted. Why be cute and pretend that my tongue wasn't hanging out for the job? If she didn't think I'd be eager, she wouldn't have come to this place. I glanced down at my low, tropicweight boots. They were travel-scuffed, badly, but did it matter?

I pressed my thumb against the lockplate of the safebox at the foot of the bunk-shaped cubicle, waited for the "ding" that would show that the print had been recognized and, when it came, raised up the narrow lid and lifted out my cameras.

My record unit. Smaller than a deck of cards, it stored its images on a coil of split-metallic foil and could shoot them individually or in a continuous strip that could run for eleven minutes at one exposure every half-second.

For light, it had twin electronic flashtubes, one behind each of the tiny windows at its upper corners. These could be fired individually or together, or set to go off alternately when the camera was set for continuous operation.

Shockproof, watertight, I used it for the things I needed to keep a record of or didn't want the bother of copying. Client agreements, setups I might need to repeat, ship schedules. It went into the zippered pocket on the left sleeve of my jumpsuit.