

Armor 2

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Part One

ARE YOU THERE?

"Your heart is not your honor." - The Great One, Her Majesty, the Empress Masao

I hated most Japs anyway even before that tallest guard reckoned he was tall enough. Earthling Japs I mean, of course. Not the folks on the Great Planet Masao. Masaons (as oriental as you can get) are pretty much what everyone, including even me, would like to be when they grow up.

But, this was Earth, on the outer edges of what passed for New Tokyo and I was in a clear plassteel cube for three days by then with no charges actually filed, no legal representation, no visitors allowed (as if I had any friends in that bag of ashes anyway). And naked. Completely naked, no privacy at all, thereby continuing the Earthling Oriental tradition of humiliating prisoners after they're down (don't want to forget their other traditions of rolling over with their paws in the air once they've had their asses kicked and later lying in their children's schoolbooks about "what *really* happened").

I guess this tall guard, easily the tallest of the six, actually thought he could take me. He baited me several times a day and, when they came to take me out, he was the only one carrying a smirk instead of a stunner. He really was fit. And he really was tall, at least a foot taller than me. (I suppose I should say "cubit" instead of "foot" nowadays, since the Seals opened). We had a few words. I pointed out that any "Boy" like him probably *was* tough with five other guards backing him up. And then....

"I'll tell you what, Slant Boy, I'll give you the first punch."

I did not cheat. I stood dead still while he took his stance and when he flexed to attack I broke his right jaw with my left palm. I probably shouldn't have broken two of his left ribs with my right thumb, but prison makes me a little grumpy.

I dropped immediately to my knees, head down on my forearms, which is why they only stunned me once. The plasteel shackles were actually pretty funny, seeing as how they had to take them off right away in order to let me put my clothes on for the trip.

The trip was something. Miles and miles of black ash, me stuck sealed up in the back of the hover with, well, several surgically imbedded keys to plasteel shackles that didn't show up on any bioscan. They do show up on the old x-rays, but they only use those on the Outer Planets where they're too broke to x-ray every prisoner. There you go. I saw no point in busting out of the shackles. To go where? Sealed in the back of the hover, no way to the pilots? And what if I could break through? Then what? So, I sat back and

eyed the busted, blackened island of Japan beneath me and thought about something I think about sometimes-remember when we used to call it the "Universe"? And then the "Known Planets"? We called it a lot of things.

Since the cracking of the Seals, we call space "The Heavens" now. Maybe we should, because...

Or maybe I should back up a bit and introduce myself:

I'm Jack Crow.

ONE

You might have heard of me.

If you follow what passes for "News" these days, you almost certainly have. The slithering press has been curling around my boots for a long time. (Funny, isn't it, that we still call it The Press even though there's probably not been a real working printing press in use for centuries? But they still use the word "Journalist" with a straight face, so what the Hell?)

Let's settle for some of the highlights:

UNIVERSAL NEWS SERVICE - EARTH

"Mr. Jack Crow, whom prosecutors have labeled a 'shadowy and notorious figure' was acquitted today for the alleged theft, from the Planet -----, of the so-called "Quark Spark", an attachment to the accelerated Warp Bleeder Assembly, whom experts say will exponentially increase faster than light travel..."

Almost none of that is true.

Well, maybe the "shadowy and notorious" part. And the Quark Spark did work like a dream for an amazing twenty-odd years before the brains thought up something better. There are minor Fleet support ships riding it to this day.

But I wasn't "acquitted of the alleged theft". The charges were dropped. Not because I didn't steal it because I damn well DID steal it. No, the charges were dropped because...

Well, here's the deal...

The Fat Cat from Earth who hired me (oh, yeah, it was a contract job) suddenly decided upon my arrival that the agreed-on price was too steep. He offered me half.

Half.

Lemme tell you: Getting off ----- had been plenty messy; my partner didn't make it. Ggyyl might have only been a bloody Alien, but he died very bloody less than three feet away from me and I wasn't much in the mood to offer a 50% discount just because only half of us were still alive.

And I knew a few names...

Fat Cat Two agrees to the deal. I deliver the gadget itself, the information coil, the whole works. Three hours later I'm busted for "Armed Interstellar Piracy". Seems Fat Cat One and Fat Cat Two (I still won't speak their names) had made themselves a little deal.

Only they have a problem: if I'm drilled for the crime, then they become liable for receiving the most famous stolen merchandise in the known universe.

Enter the lawyers, dozens and dozens of 'em, every single one of them speaking lawyer. By the end of the gobble, I'm out and Fat Cats & Co. have an exclusive Quark Spark Patent.

"What about my money" I asked the judge.

"This is now a matter for the civil courts," she replied without once looking in my direction.

Great. I'm down to my last few credits and the only guy I can get to represent me is a young dreamer idealist who tells me "years and years, I guess, Mr. Crow. And then you still Probably won't win. They own this town."

He was a good kid, on board for three whole days before he started getting the threats. They threatened me, too. Not in person, of course. Even in those days, few people were *that* stupid.

So. No lawyer. No money. Little chance of winning even if I should survive death threats even I took seriously.

Fat Cat One had all the cards.

But, he also had a daughter... a daughter who "had simply never met anybody like you, Jack!"

Dropping the right bread crumbs here and there managed to get the slithering press and her father's security detail to arrive simultaneously at the very public (and therefore very safe) Salt Lake Airport. The ship for our 'elopement' was due to leave in 90 minutes. It took half that to get a bonded credit voucher worth exactly and precisely three times what Daddy had promised to pay me in the beginning.

Imagine that.

As Daddy's goons were leading her away, she called my name back over her shoulder.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

I didn't say a word, just gripped my money a little tighter.

Her name was Hannah, a beautiful, mysterious girl. Fragile. Every once in a while, I think about her some.

Anyway, I was never acquitted.

So now, about the damned book...

Universal News Service Book Reviews

"The Quill Pen"

By Skip Quill

Today's book:

"Felix, Forgotten Hero, Forgotten Guardian?"

By Jack Crow.

The notorious and shadowy figure [how creative!] Jack Crow has quite possibly put a lie to that old say: "Everyone has at least one good book in him". If indeed, Mr. Crow does have a good (or even decent) book in him, it is still in there somewhere. I do not know Mr. Crow, but his writing ability suggests he is either a doddering senile or an exceptionally bright squirrel. This book is a work of almost supernatural banality and worse - a bitter disappointment. The location and activities of the missing Lord Paul of Golden - whom Mr. Crow knows only as "Felix" - have been the subject of near-constant speculation since his disappearance. Now we know where he was, at least where he as for a time, and we have to learn it from a book almost as ponderous as its title. And how do we know it's accurate? From the incredible reaction: the scandals in Fleet have un from the bottom ranks all the way to the highest offices on Militar itself. That, and the legions of Antwar veterans who have come forward to corroborate Mr. Crow's details.

It appears that every word in this book is as true as Mr. Crow could make it.

So why must it be so bad???

One has to wonder: how done anyone turn THIS story, this INSIDE story, about THIS man, into the reader's equivalent of a boot camp slog? My theory is that Mr. Crow had no idea - none whatsoever - who his "Felix" was. On top of that, Mr. Crow is purposely mysterious about this "Immersion" process of his which is undoubtedly the source or his accuracy. Consistent, anyway - one of the few things in this endless tome worth knowing he doesn't choose to include.

But how can you know some of the most intricate details about one of the most famous people alive without apparently KNOWING he was one of the most famous people alive? How could Mr. Crow not know that this "Felix" was, in fact, Lord Paul Adam Elliott II, the presumed heir apparent to the Chair of the First Guardian, the single most powerful office in the history of Man, referred to by virtually every media outlet in existence as "The Star Prince?"

Have there been any more glamorous and captivating figures than Lord Paul in this, or any, age? One loses count of the dozens of bad biographies, pretend exposes', outrageous gossip columns and bizarre conspiracy theories this one man has generated. Most of them are blatantly bogus, for as every serious

journalist knows, the families of Golden's Grand Council never give interviews of a personal nature.

[Gee, Skippy! You're a serious journalist? That must make your lifetime companion so proud!]

All of this is lost on Mr. Crow. It is all Antwar, Antwar, Antwar...

And he goes on and on with this. How bad my book is, how bad a writer I am, etc., etc. How wonderful was the Star Prince gets a lot of space. Quite a lot. Skippy is clearly one of those pitiful, eternally keening "he still lives!" types. You've seen 'em, I know. Tears in their beady little eyes when they shriek into your face with "I KNOW he's still alive!"

Uh, just out of curiosity, why?

"Because... well, he just MUST BE!!!"

Sad, really. Maybe more than sad. Makes you want to shout at them all: "Hey, sports fans! He's DEAD. Have another drink and shut the Hell up!"

Most of the reviews were like Little Skip, basically hammering me and my book and complaining and whining about the Star Prince.

But there was one by That Woman. Her name was Nannette Roshell Felter and I hated her for at least three reasons: her review skewered me more than anyone else's, she made me think, and she was too pretty to stay mad at. I did actually meet her at a literary shindig once and...

Ah, well, men. Spectacularly beautiful, witty, and exquisitely charming will a guy's anger away so fast you forget what riled you in the first place.

And again, she made me think.

Bitch.

And this is how she did it: she talked about The Painting.

Or course, she first had to hammer me and my book

Sun Universal News Services (SUNS)

Book Reviews

By Nannette Roshell

... killing Ants and then killing more Ants followed by... killing Ants. This is not to dispute that Lord Paul (known only to this Jack Crow as "Felix") displayed staggering courage and near-superhuman battlefield gifts - both of which have been the subject of countless back-up testimonials from fellow soldiers.

But what of the CONTEXT?

This was not simply an Antwar hero. This was possibly the most stunning champion produced by that horrible conflict. And, by the way, Mr. Jack Crow

[here she comes] - *he was the STAR PRINCE!!!*

Could it be [here she comes again] that this Jack Crow person did not know who "Felix" WAS? Is it POSSIBLE to be so dense? What about his magical life?

What about The Painting?

Don't' we - all of us - remember it? The beauty of it, the sense of majesty, the bright hope? Can we all not picture it in our mind's eye? Can't we? Try it now..

That vast Council Palladium in the background, the solid gold, perfectly circular Grand Council table in the foreground, the inspiring visage of the First Guardian, left hand raised high in the air accentuating some point - and all the other men and women of the Council ignoring him completely, instead gently smiling at the six year old boy in their leader's right hand, fast asleep cheek-first on his Daddy's chest?

Is it not THE symbol of mankind blossoming in the stars? Free from the confines of Earth, free from anything save endless possibility?

And those FACES, those marvelous FACES around that golden table! Those wise men and women, who had already made their places and made their fortunes and who, amidst the infinite possibilities of evil their wealth and power could harvest, cared only to promote enterprise, hope, and justice. Cared only, about, history has shown time and again, doing the right thing.

And yet this MR. Crow only..

Okay, okay, OKAY! So I blew it! I admit it. Is everybody happy now?

Funny thing is, I've actually seen The Painting. I'm not much of the tourist type, but on a trip to Golden I did in fact wait those endless hours in line to take the tour. Almost as bad as seeing the Vatican - the Old Vatican on Earth, I should say. And I'm glad I did it. If you're ever there, trust me, it's worth the claustrophobia. And like everyone else who's ever seen it, The Painting got me.

Got me good.

Many words have been written about it, all of them better than mine. But I can tell you what it meant to me. It meant...

It meant somewhere out here in these never-ending Heavens, there has to be a place for everyone. For anyone.

For me.

And no. No, no NO! Even after I had written the book I had no idea that boy in The Painting was Felix. I had found out by then that his real name was Lord Paul Adam Elliott II but I'd never put the two together. Think, folks. The "notorious and shadowy figure, Jack Crow"? Where do you think I mis-spent most of *my* life?

Answer: with other notorious and shadowy figures, that's where. On the Outer Planets, busting of out jail on Planet A so I could later bust out of jail on

Planet B followed by... well, there was usually a Planet C to follow. And a D. And an E. Take it up to, say, Planet J and you get the picture. Where was I gonna hear all of this "Star Prince" crap? The Outer Planets don't have much in the way of society pages. For that matter, a lot of 'em didn't have much in the way of society, unless you count hybrid animal cruelty as Art.

So I'm out there grinding hard and scrambling harder and risking more on a regular basis than most people risk in their whole lifetimes. Yes, I was born on The Outer Planets, a colony brat, and let me give you a little hint, most of the people who go out there are not trying to build a Golden or a Masao or a New Jerusalem. Civilization is not in their best interests. Civilization is mean. Civilization gets upset about extortion and forced prostitution and torture and murder and, to this day, Civilization is *against* slavery. For a monster, where's the fun?

And there were some monsters, living and breathing pain-for-fun Evils. But mostly just thugs and their thugs and then more thugs with their thugs. Growing up, I must have had a dozen strongmen running things. We had a few called "Boss". We had a few "Your Majesty"s. We had one that insisted we call him "Father". Another preferred "The Duke". My sorta favorite called himself "The Grand Seer". He had a terrific goatee I tried to copy and an even better voice. The night his bodyguards slaughtered him, you could hear his screams all the way to the prison yards.

I got out of there the hard way because there was no easy way and I was too young and too stupid to realize that my life would not automatically become gentle. Much of it was brutal, much of it was mean, mean as slamming your teeth through bricks and I was mean sometimes, too. Mean on purpose.

Some of it was fun.

Most of it was dangerous, or seemed to end up that way an awful lot. So dangerous, so often I began to suspect I was getting hooked on the "Look *out!* Life and death right *now!* I won sometimes and lost a bit and I got scars you don't want to see and there are stories you don't want to hear and I did things I will never tell anyone and all of this was to scratch out a few credits. Just a few credits for the basics, like food, shelter, an occasional drunken binge, and of course, lawyer fees.

I'm not from money and I'm not from the aristocracy. The collective value of my so-called family is just about dead even with spit. Except for being taught to read as a young man (no, dammit, not as a child) I'm self-fucking educated. So maybe you can dig why current cinema stars and the social ramifications as to why the whoop-de do "Star Prince" attended *this* gala ball but not *that* gala ball were not a though, much less a priority.

I just knew about Felix.

Or I though I knew about Felix. I though I knew him better than anyone else alive. I was a fool. Maybe the biggest fool that ever...

But, no. There are two others...

They saw it with me. Together we saw it, saw the Antwar.

Together we saw it up close. Up close and gruesome and grim and ghastly and

so ugly-macabre-terrifying-senseless and it was scary as all Hell and we saw it all, all of it, through Felix's eyes and we saw it through Felix's pain and we heard it, too, through the screams of his dead and dying comrades. We saw it, saw him, felt him, almost breathed it with him and you know why it was so impossibly horrible?

Because the Ants were always coming.

I guess it's time to tell you about Immersion.