

## ***Rat Games***

### ***Short Fiction by Stephen L. Moss***

“You’re so cute when you’re angry,” Veinc cooed as she slid one tentacle around my waist.

“Cut that out,” I snapped, and tried to push her away.

“Aw, Burnsey-Wurnsey is a sore loser? Come on, pay up.”

I fished out my debit card and slid it into the AutoTrans in the center of our table. I touched the screen and six thousand credits swam from my account to hers. I sighed. Served me right for trying to beat a Zirxan at darts.

Six thousand was soy nuggets compared to what I owed Franco. His thugs had been hounding me almost daily. My eyes scanned the bar involuntarily. That’s when I saw the lady approaching.

“Mr. Burns?” she said. She looked like a vid star. Tall and deliciously curvy. If it was a doc’s work it was top quality. Her sleeveless gown was holographic, a swirl of moving colors that pulsed and danced to the beat of her heart.

“Well, hello,” I said, my tone perhaps a shade too friendly. I could feel Veinc bristling beside me.

The lady sat, and punched up a Beaujolais on the AutoTrans. A harried waiter brought it moments later, then ran off without a second glance.

“I hear you’re good at finding people,” she said.

“That I am. Who would you like to find?”

“My fiancé. His name is Randy, Randy Saint-Jerome. We were supposed to be married this coming Saturday.” Her voice shook. “Now I can’t find him anywhere.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart.” I said. I jerked a thumb at Veinc. “My partner here is an expert tracker. Tell us about him.”

She gave me the sob story. He hadn’t shown up for the rehearsal dinner. Her family was outraged. She suspected foul play. He didn’t answer his phone. She hadn’t found him at his flat. The neighbors hadn’t seen him.

“He would never do this to me on purpose. I’m afraid something has happened to him.”

“Is there any reason why someone would have it in for him?” I asked.

“No. Not that I know of.”

“Don’t worry, darling. We’ll find him.” I started to quote her my fee, then looked at her extravagant gown, thought of Franco and his enforcers, and doubled it. She didn’t flinch. Veinc spoke for the first time.

“Say, aren’t you Carly Tremayne?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. You look taller in person.”

“Everybody tells me that.”

I stood up. “Miss Tremayne, where did you see Randy last?”

“At his office. Let me give you the address.” She tapped on her palmscreen with a finger, then turned her hand toward me. It displayed an address in Building 988.

I held up my own hand, palm outstretched. She tapped hers again. My own palmscreen lit up, and beeped as it accepted the file. Then she pressed her outstretched hand against mine. I shivered involuntarily.

“Thank you,” she whispered. She downed her drink and left.

“Who’s Carly Tremayne?” I asked Veinc. She gave me that what-module-have-you-been-living-under stare of hers.

“She plays Vivian on ‘As the Moon Wanes.’”

I shrugged. “Never seen it.”

“Figures. You should try something besides those ancient music vids once in a while.”

“Hey, leave Bruce Springsteen out of this.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

So, she really was a vid star. Fantastic. A high profile client like that would look good on my resume. I finished my drink.

“He could be off-planet by now,” Veinc said.

“Could be. Let’s assume he’s not.”

“Gotcha.”

I stared at the door Carly had left through. “I wouldn’t stray too far if she were mine,” I said.

A tentacle instantly snaked around my neck, cutting off my breathing. Veinc turned me around and brought my face next to hers. Her eyes burned with jealousy.

“You wanna take that back?” she asked.

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I paid the tab and we rode a downbound 'vator to the tube station. When its doors opened, three burly men were standing there, blocking our way. Their faces were identical.

"Mr. Franco wants to talk to you," they all said at once. Then my phone chirped. I recognized Franco's code.

"Burns," I said.

"Where are the credits you owe me?"

"Could you kindly ask these gentlemen to step aside before my partner gets angry?"

"One of those clones is rigged to explode. I have the detonator in my hands. Your mutant lady friend will keep her tentacles to herself if she's wise."

"We're on a case, Franco. If you give us a little space I'll be able to pay you back shortly."

"I've heard that before, Burns."

"This is a big time client. You'll get your money."

"You gonna pay me before you make one of your famous 'investments?' What kind of idiot tries to sell gravity boots to the Talerians?"

"They have feet, don't they? How was I supposed to know they're only vestigial?"

"You should do your homework before you take out a loan. You're such a famous detective. I figured you would have some brains."

"Are you finished insulting me? I'd like to get back to work."

"You got twenty-four hours. Pay me or you take a trip into space without a suit."

"No problem," I said, and hung up. Franco's clones faded into the crowd and we went on our way.

"You tried to sell boots to the Talerians?" Veinc asked.

"Um, did I forget to mention that?"

"Never mind."

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Randy worked for a travel agency on the 75th floor of Building 988. His supervisor was a Dorsan. It leaped onto its desk and extended its furry left hand to shake. All Dorsans are left-handed, and never touch anyone but their own family members with their right hands.

"I'm looking for Randy Saint-Jerome," I said.

The Dorsan twirled its long thumbs – a nervous habit they have. "I hope you find him," it said. "He owes me money."

"How much?" I asked.

“Enough.”

“When did you see him last?”

“Five days ago. But I don’t think he did a lick of work for five more before that. He was on the phone all day, sure enough, but he wasn’t talking about tour-ship packages and hotel upgrades.”

“Did you ever catch what he was saying?”

“He lowered his voice whenever I walked by, but I think he was talking to someone named Willy.”

“Why does he owe you money?”

“He said it was to cover his wedding. Lady he’s marrying is rich and famous. He wanted to impress her parents. But I wondered if he was on something. Some kind of rec drug, maybe.”

“May I take a look at his desk?” I asked.

“Sure, but it’s pass-coded. I don’t have access to the files.”

“See what you can do, Veinc,” I said.

She slid into the desk chair and talked softly to the computer.

“Kid stuff,” she said. “Give me a minute.”

She hummed quietly to the console. Soon a menu was flashing on its screen.

“Bingo,” Veinc said.

We searched his files for anomalies. It was all pretty boring. Tour package contracts, records of calls to clients. Then I found something. A series of numbers in the margins of a brochure on the hot springs of Sirius II. Comm codes, probably. I jotted them on my palm and saved.

I shook the Dorsan’s left hand again – handshaking seems to be very important to them – and beamed it my card. “Call me if you think of anything else,” I said.

“Sense anything?” I asked Veinc as we rode the ‘vator down.

“I think I have Randy’s scent,” she said. “Someone did a lot of sweating at his desk, and Dorsans don’t sweat.” She paused. “That line about ‘Willy’ sounded like a lie. The Dorsan’s voice broke as he said it. On top of that, we weren’t alone. There was someone – or *something* – else there somewhere.

I punched up the first comm code and listened.

“You’ve reached Warriors, Chicago Sector’s number one rat coliseum,” said a recorded voice in my ear. “For a list of upcoming events, say ‘events’.”

“Maybe he gambled away the Dorsan’s money,” I said. Veinc shrugged.

The second number reached the voice mail of a Doctor Feiro, who billed herself as a “lifestyle” physician.

I recognized the third number without calling it. The Department of Rehabilitation, Chicago Sector’s home for wayward criminals. I’ve done a lot of business with them. Occupational hazard.

“Let’s take them in order,” I said.

The rat coliseum was in the next sky-rise over. The whole 43rd floor was a single room. We carded our entrance fees at the door and received small access badges. My badge projected a hologram of a rat clinging to my shirt, rapier clutched in its paw. Veinc refused to wear hers.

“I hate this kind of place,” she said.

“Do you want to wait outside?”

“I’ll be all right.” She scowled and curled her tentacles defensively around her body.

Cheering men stood around tables. Each table had a holo projection above it so you could see the action from farther away. Mutant rats battled in gladiatorial combat. Tiny swords flashed in the lights of the cameras.

I found the floor manager, and realized I knew him.

“Winkler,” I said. “I thought you were still in jail.”

“Time off for good behavior,” Winkler said, and smiled. Holographic smoke drifted from his nose. “Do I know you?”

I introduced us.

“I’d think you would remember us after we nailed you on that kidnapping charge,” I said.

“Of course. Damn rehab drugs. Burns, right. Just the guy I need to kill.”

Veinc had a tentacle around his throat before either of us saw her moving. The razor edge of the knife she held gleamed against Winkler’s neck.

“Hey! Just a joke!” There was panic in his voice.

“Zirxans don’t care for jokes,” I said. “It’s okay, Veinc.”

She let him go.

“I’m looking for Randy Saint-Jerome,” I said.

“Who isn’t?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Did he make trouble here?” I asked.

“If you call trying to rig the games trouble, then yeah, he did.”

“Rig the games?”

Winkler looked up at the projection. Two silver rats fenced with rapiers. One caught the other with a shallow slash across its midsection. Blood dripped in a smiling wound. The crowd around the table cheered.

“He managed to get hold of a female,” Winkler said. “These vermin’ll do almost anything for a little romance.”

“How did it go down?” I asked.

“I don’t know all the details. I haven’t been back here very long. It’s just what I’ve heard.”

“From whom?”

“From the guy I answer to. And he heard it from Mr. Tremayne himself.”

“Tremayne? Any relation to Carly?”

“Bingo,” Winkler said. “He’s her daddy.”

“Can we talk to him?”

“Hold on. I gotta go through channels.” Winkler spoke into his phone, then waited, then spoke some more. Then he looked at us. “Follow me,” he said.

“Sense anything?” I whispered to Veinc as we followed Winkler to a door on the far side of the room.

“I can’t smell anything over the stench of those designer pheromones he’s wearing.”

Rufus Tremayne’s office had its own private gaming table. Some kind of six-rat wrestling match was going on while the owner sat at a huge obsidian desk talking on the phone. He quickly disconnected when we entered.

“Devro Burns,” he said. “Your reputation precedes you.”

I nodded. “My associate, Veincxes Traxandrestar,” I said, gesturing to Veinc. She gave him a Zirxan bow, tentacles on the floor.

“I understand you’re trying to find my daughter’s fiancé. I suppose she hired you?”

“That’s confidential.”

“Whatever. Listen. I don’t know where he is. If I did, I’d have him arrested.”

“He tried to rig the games?”

“Rig them? He tried to ruin me. Got some of my fighters to throw matches. Some big credit clients watched their champions drop their swords and forfeit their contests. The integrity of my place is in question. And that chump thinks he’s going to marry Carly? I should have hired you myself. My own detectives can’t find him. How does two million sound?”

“No thanks,” I said, swallowing hard. “I can’t serve two masters.”

“Well, then there’ll be a bonus for you when you find him.”

“Fair enough. Is your daughter aware of what Randy’s been up to?”

“Hard to say. I’ve tried to keep her out of it. She doesn’t come here much. She’s not comfortable with the business I run. But it paid for all the surgery she needed done before she could land a part on a vid. She owes that to me – and to the rats.”

Veinc gestured to the table.

“How do you get them to fight and die for you?” she asked. “I’ve heard they’re pretty intelligent.”

“It’s in their blood,” Tremayne answered, barely glancing at the table where the rats were locked in combat. “They live to kill each other off. We’re just letting them do what comes naturally.”

As we left, I paused at the rat table. One seemed to be strangling another. Two more had an opponent pinned down and were about to scratch its eyes out. Hadn’t there been six? I shrugged. There were some rocks and other obstacles littered around. Maybe the other one was hiding somewhere. That’s what I would do if it were me in there.

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Dr. Feiro’s waiting room might have been nice once. The furnishings were expensive, but their upholstery was dated and torn. A fine layer of dust sat on them. No one waited there.

I pressed the call button at the unoccupied reception desk. I heard the slide and squeak of someone slowly getting up from a vinyl examination chair. After a pause, she trudged into view from around a corner.

“Can I help you?” she asked. Her eyes were red and tired. Her left sleeve was rumpled, as if she had just rolled it down. I thought I saw the bulge of a port just below the crook of her elbow. A philodrine addict, probably.

“Dr. Feiro?”

She nodded. I showed her my PI creds. “Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Not at all, but I can’t guarantee that I’ll answer them.”

And she wouldn’t. Doctor-patient privilege and all that. Wouldn’t admit to knowing Randy, or Carly Tremayne. She smiled apologetically, and waited for us to leave.

“One more general question, if I may,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Could you make a human look like a Dorsan?”

“Easily.”

“Even smell like one?” Veinc asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Have you ever done it?” I asked.

She gave me a thin smile.

“Nice try,” she said.

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“Any trace of him in there?” I asked Veinc as we left.

“Yes, but not Carly Tremayne.”

“No. Carly wouldn’t need to stoop that low.” Feiro was obviously the type of doc who gives bad guys new faces so they can disappear. She probably preferred payment in the hard currency of crystal philodrine to the exchange of digits on the AutoTrans. I supposed she’d be more forthcoming for a taste of her favorite candy. But I wasn’t going to operate that way, Franco or no Franco.

I caught movement in the corner of my eye and jerked my head around, but saw nothing. Hmmm.

Twice more I thought I saw a flash of movement. Once, I whipped around so fast Veinc went into combat stance. She grabbed me in a bear hug with one tentacle. Knives gleamed in two of the others.

“Don’t startle me like that,” she snapped.

“Sorry. Do you feel like we’re being followed?”

“Mmm-hmm. Something small.” She sniffed the air. “Mammalian.”

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We headed back to the travel agency. The Dorsan stood up eagerly when it noticed us.

“I have some information that might help you,” it said. “I’ve been combing the comm logs. There are calls to some interesting people. Drug people. Gangsters.” It held up a hand. There was data on its palmscreen, but it was written in Dorsan.

“Thanks,” I said cheerfully. “Beam it over. I think we can use it.”

Data started parading across my screen. I pretended I could read it.

“Fantastic. Listen, thanks for your help.”

I thrust my right hand at it to shake. As it looked down at my hand, drool dripped from the corners of its lips – a Dorsan sign of disgust, or anger.

“You insult me,” it said.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, and quickly extended my left hand. It shook with me, reluctantly. Its eyes traveled to the sword-bearing holo of the rat that I had forgotten to remove from my shirt.

It’s wrong,” the Dorsan said softly. “What they do to those creatures.”

“Maybe,” I answered. “I don’t take sides.”

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“What was with that handshake?” Veinc asked after we’d left. “Might as well have told it you’re sleeping with its mother.”

“Just making sure it was really a Dorsan,” I said.

“It *is* wrong, you know,” she said, after a pause. “Making them kill each other like that,” she said as we got back in the ‘vator.

“I don’t like it either, but we have a job to do.”

“My own kind,” she said. “We were slaves once too.” I could see the memories in her face. The battlefields of Zirxe her race had been designed for. The violence and the agony that had killed both her parents and two sisters before the Treaties of Sovereignty, sixty Earth years ago.

“I don’t want to work for this family,” she said. “Let them find their own disappearing groom-to-be.”

I thought of Franco.

“Will you come to my funeral?” I asked.

She scowled. “Not funny.”

“Know anyone who wants to buy a warehouse full of gravity boots?”

“Okay, okay.”

There was a shadow darting across the floor when the ‘vator opened. A mouse, or maybe a rat? I stepped into the hall. Nothing.

“I need a drink,” I said. “I’m seeing things.” We stopped at a stall along the Strand. I punched up a screwdriver.

I realized I’d forgotten to call the third number on Randy’s list. The Department of Rehab. I reached a contact over there and asked about something that had been gnawing on the edge my brain. The answer I got made everything fit together. I cursed myself for not calling sooner.

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The turnstile at the rat games scanned my badge and opened.

“I’ll wait outside,” Veinc said.

“No. I might need you this time.”

She glared at me, then fished her badge out of a pocket and flashed it.

I found Winkler near the lights of the main event.

“How’s it going, Randy?” I asked. He started and his eyes went wide for a second. He looked for a place to run to, but Veinc had moved quickly. We had him surrounded.

“I can’t talk here,” he said. “Can you meet me after my shift? I can explain.”

“Explain it to your fiancée,” I said, starting to punch her number into my palm.

“Carly’s the one who hired you? She’s not my fiancée. She called off the wedding a month ago.” His eyes scanned the room. “She’s working for Daddy now,”

“Same difference,” I said. I finished punching her number.

“How did you figure me out?” he asked, stalling.

“Winkler’s still in the slammer. No time off for good behavior.”

“Why did you do this?” Veinc asked him.

He looked up at the holo of the main event. Whole platoons of rats were pitted against one another. They charged with flaming spears and sliced each other with jagged-looking scimitars.

“They’re sentient,” He said. “The smartest ones live to breed, of course. They have evolved. I’ve learned the rudiments of their language. They only kill because of all the drugs Tremayne shoots them with.

“Now some of them have escaped. A female – her name is hard to pronounce – is their leader. I’m working with her. This slaughter is going to stop. We will ruin Tremayne. Then we will go before the Sovereignty Council and gain citizenship for the DeLill. That’s what they call themselves.”

“Well, they’re going to have to do it without you,” I said, and looked at my palm again. I put my finger over the send button.

“Please,” he said, his voice edged with desperation. “For the rats’ sake, not mine.”

I thought of Franco’s goons. They had a reputation for carving epithets on their victims’ foreheads with hot iron poker. My finger lowered toward the button.

“Burns.” Veinc said. She wrapped her tentacles around my wrists, pulling them apart. She was staring at the battle that raged in the arena. Then she turned to me. I had thought Zirxans couldn’t cry, but I guess I was wrong. Her eyes held mine until I thought my knees would buckle.

“I’ll give you the six thousand back,” she said.

“Don’t sweat it,” I answered. I turned to Randy.

“Okay, Winkler,” I said. “Keep your nose clean. Let me know if you see the guy. I’ll tell Miss Tremayne he got the best of me.”

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Veinc and I made love that night. It’s difficult to explain how, with her being so different. Let’s just say we’ve worked something out.

The next morning I heard a tiny knock on the door of my compartment, then the scratch of something scurrying away. I got up.

The cloth satchel was stained. It looked like it had been chewed by rodents. Inside it I found a debit card. Generic user. Untraceable.

There was a note in there too. It said: *There’s sixty thou on this. Hope it helps. Thanks, from all of us.*  
–R.

I turned the card over in my hands, then verified it on the AutoTrans. There was enough here to pay off Franco and have just enough left for a couple rounds of drinks. I nudged Veinc awake.

“Get your darts, beautiful,” I said. “I want a rematch.”



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