

THRILLING TALES FROM BEYOND THE ETHER

# RAYGUN

REVIVAL



**Nor To The Strong**

*by Michael Merriam*

**It Happened One Sunday**

*by Tim Baer*

**Serial: Deuces Wild**

**In the Lap of the Gods, Part Four**

*by L. S. King*

**Issue 19**

**April 01, 2007**

*"Sunday afternoon at Augustgrad," by David Levy*

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## Overlord's Lair

**A**mid the strange forces that whirl and flow between dimensions, bringing hallucinations and fantastical sights to the scene at the first of April, reason has again prevailed, and we offer an excellent combination of dark and light in this issue of Ray Gun Revival.

Issue 19 starts off with a piece not for the faint of heart, **Nor to the Strong** by Michael Merriam. *We debated about whether to publish this one, and ultimately decided that thought-provoking stories need to be presented, even if we don't always agree with the viewpoint of the author. (I'm not saying we don't or don't in this case, just that it is a good thing to provoke thought in the reader on occasion, and we were talking about this long after the first reading. That, I think, is a compliment in and of itself. – Editor)*

*A weary soldier must come to grips with the line between being a warrior and being a murderer.*

I did not recognize two of the men coming up the lane, but the third one, the one leading them, was a small, nervous man named Ramirez, who was our contact with the local rebellion cell. He glanced at Becker, then at the trees, I supposed searching for an ambush by Earth forces. As if the army of the mother planet cared one way or another about us out here in the remote countryside.

Balancing that tale, we trip merrily along to present Tim Baer's **It Happened One Sunday**. *(Come to think of it, this one may not be for the faint of heart, either. <grin> - Editor)*

*Something crashes into the parking lot of the Church one Sunday morning...*

The metallic disk came screaming in over the roof of the church, scattering terrified pigeons everywhere. It barely missed the modest steeple before auguring into the parking lot.... She started screaming, pointing one bony hand at the crater. A creature walked up out of the crater, chattering at the crowd. The gathered humans gave a collective gasp and fell back into the church, leaving Pastor Gregg and the sheriff alone to confront it.

Alas, transmission of this month's *Jasper Squad* installment was intercepted by enemy forces. Even now, undercover squads of Bothans are infiltrating the enemy emplacement to attempt to sneak the plans...uh, episode...out to safety. Their skills are matched only by their reckless disregard for life.

*Deuces Wild*, by L. S. King—your never-humble Overlord—continues with part four of **In the Lap of the Gods**.

*When we last left our heroes, they were both trapped in the self-destructing palace of the dead Eridani emperor—Tristan in the sublevels, and Slap locked in an audience chamber, along with another prisoner, Kebba.*

“How do we get out?”

“Follow me!” Kebba said.

Slap did, trying to keep his footing as the building boomed and shuddered. They turned a corner and saw several servants huddled, crying.

“We’re getting out. You understand? Follow. Kebba, tell them!”

The native called to them and gestured. They chattered an answer. He shook his head at Slap. “They say stone fell and blocked the way.”

“Let’s see if we can unblock it! Show me where.”

They ran down another passage. Slap stared at the damage. Not just stone blocking the way, the whole area was gone. Brago’s Bands, there had to be a way!

So without any further delay, or admitting any shenanigans which definitely did not take place at any time before or since the publication of this issue, plunge on to the adventures that await!

L. S. King

Johne Cook

# Nor to the Strong

by Michael Merriam

Becker pulled the small box of cards from his trouser pocket and settled at the kitchen table. "Shall we?"

I pulled a wobbly chair up next to him. We had nothing else to do, we four. Nothing except wait. "Of course."

"I haven't the credits, I lost all of mine last night," Knowles said.

"I'll spot you," Becker told her.

"Thanks," said Knowles. "You know I'm good for it. I'll pay you back when we get to Earth."

I looked over at Montry. I thought it might be some time before either Becker or Knowles returned to Earth. The two Earthers might find themselves in our care on Gawain for months yet.

Montry passed back a grim smile. He was thinking the same as I. He looked at Becker. "Two," he said, setting his bet. Montry's blue eyes narrowed. He was a new recruit; young, energetic, and not happy with guard detail. Montry would rather be out fighting. He wanted desperately to come to battle with the troops Earth had sent to keep its colonies in line. I remembered being like Montry, before three years of useless warfare ate at my soul and a trip-wire explosive took half my right foot. Guard duty suited me fine these days.

"Two?" asked Knowles. "Two's hardly any bet at all. You'd think a religious man would have more faith. Surely if you asked your God, he'll provide you winning cards."

Knowles' voice was high, and came through her nose. I'd been told that she was an accountant or something, not even a combatant, but a civilian who had been at the wrong place at the

wrong time. Becker was her escort.

"Wouldn't you think that, Becker?" Knowles continued.

Becker shrugged as Knowles tossed in two chips and glared at Montry. Knowles hated religion, and Montry was a card-carrying Catholic, loyal to the Pope in hiding somewhere in the Outer Colonies.

Montry frowned at her. "It doesn't work that way. Free will and all."

"What does free will have to do with anything? Couldn't your mighty God conjure up a winning hand for you?"

"Two and one," I said, trying to head off the impending argument. Every night Knowles picked one topic and tried to push Montry's buttons.

Becker looked at his cards. He mixed them around in his large hands, and tossed in four credit chips, raising the pot.

"Four, now there's a real bet, don't you think?" Knowles sneered at Montry, her little brown eyes gleaming from behind her glasses.

Montry tossed his cards onto the table, face down. Knowles started to open her mouth, but closed it at a look from Becker. That was the way it usually played out. If Knowles was feeling nasty, Becker would silence her with a look, his deep blue eyes glaring from under shaggy black brows, telling the frumpy little woman that she was about to go too far.

"In," I said, tossing another chip into the middle of the table.

"It was my bet," Knowles said, giving me an angry look, her small hands working her cards nervously.

"Then bet."

Knowles scowled and tossed in her cards.

"Draw or reveal?" Becker said to me.

"Reveal."

Becker laid down his cards. I tried not to swear.

He took the pile of credit chips from the center of the table. "Sorry, Ferg."

I shook my head and took the cards from Becker, placing them in the randomizer.

Knowles opened her mouth, about to make another go at Montry, but the sound of the randomizer burping out the cards stopped her. I dealt the next hand.

#

Widow Somogyi shook me awake. "Someone is coming," she said in a low whisper.

I stood and yawned. I picked up the rifle next to my chair, and limped out the door into the yard, where the widow's two old hounds glared up the dusty lane while Becker chopped wood under Montry's careful guard. That was Becker. Captive or not, he liked being helpful.

I did not recognize two of the men coming up the lane, but the third one, the one leading them, was a small, nervous man named Ramirez, who was our contact with the local rebellion cell. He glanced at Becker and at the trees, searching, I supposed, for an ambush by Earth forces. As if the army of the mother planet cared one way or another about us out here in the remote countryside.

"Fergus, are the prisoners secure?" he said without preamble. That was Ramirez: all cold business. I did not like Ramirez, but I did not need to like him.

"Yes."

"Good. Good. You and Montry have them ready to be moved. I'll be by tonight with some men."

"Where are you taking them?"

"That's none of your concern," he said, his face pinched and closed. "Just blindfold them, and bring them down to the river by midnight. I'll be taking charge of them from there. You and Montry will be given a new assignment in a few days."

Ramirez looked around again, then reached into his jacket and handed me a small bag. "Give this to Mrs. Somogyi for her troubles, and tell her we will be borrowing some tools from her husband's shed, but plan to return them in the morning."

He placed the bag in my hand and turned away before I could respond, abruptly ending our conversation.

I watched as one of the men walked toward Widow Somogyi's tool shed while Ramirez and the other man started back up the lane. The man eventually trotted after them, carrying two shovels and a pickaxe.

"What was that all about?" Montry asked in a low voice as he and Becker followed me back into the cottage.

I dropped the bag on the kitchen table, where Widow Somogyi sat, sipping coffee. She opened it, and a handful of credits fell out. Becker grabbed three chipped ceramic cups and poured coffee, setting a cup in front of me.

"We're to turn Becker and Knowles over to Ramirez tonight." I told Montry. "He wants us to meet him by the river at sundown." I looked up to see Becker's reaction, but his expression did not change.

"I see," was all Montry said.

"We're supposed to get new assignments. Maybe yours will be something combat."

After breakfast, Widow Somogyi left for the little village a few miles away, her bag of credits in hand. I cleaned the dishes, washing and drying them. Montry and I decided to let Becker tell

Knowles about the plan to move them to a new location.

That afternoon Knowles and Montry fought over politics.

"I'm not saying I'm for the war, mind. I just think what's Earth's is Earth's," Knowles said. "Who sends supplies to your world? Who makes sure you're safe? Earth, that's who."

"Who takes half of everything we have? Earth, that's who." Montry countered. "And who do we need protecting from?"

"Raiders," came the instant reply, Knowles trotting out the old argument. Raiders were the generic name for the alien race Earth had encountered in this region of space. They could not compete with Earth militarily, so they contented themselves with attacking remote outposts and fleeing before the local patrols could intervene.

"There hasn't been a raider in this sector of space in over twenty years. We're not a border world anymore," said Montry.

"You're an Earth colony, subject to Earth rule," Knowles replied, her anger starting to rise.

"But, we've got no say," Montry snarled back, his jaw clenching. "We don't even get a vote in the assembly."

Knowles frowned. "You're colonists, not citizens. That's the charter. That's the way it always has been. If you're not a citizen, you can't vote. Isn't that right, Becker?"

"True," Becker answered from where he sat repairing a broken lamp.

"That doesn't make it right," I whispered, reloading the rifle I had finished cleaning.

Knowles turned her dark little eyes on me. "And planting a bomb in a government official's home is?"

"Would Earth listen to us otherwise?"

"They're not legitimate military targets," Knowles spat back. "I suppose you can sleep fine at night knowing your people blew-up some lieu-

tenant governor's defenseless children?"

I glared. "I suppose you can sleep fine at night knowing someone's child starved to death because of Earth's oppressive taxes?"

"It's not my fault you colonists don't use your resources properly."

I opened my mouth to retort, then closed it and shrugged. "It's obvious we aren't going to agree."

"So you're just going to give up? Just like that?" Knowles pressed.

"That's enough," Becker said softly.

Knowles sighed. "I need some air," she said, looking at Montry and me. "Which one of you is going to make sure I don't flee?"

"I'll go," Montry said, standing up from his chair.

I watched them walk out the door and into the growing dusk. "I hope they both come back alive."

Becker snorted and pushed the switch on the lamp. It lit. "They'll be fine," he said.

I gave him a look. "Why haven't you run for it? You seem resourceful enough; you'd probably get away if you tried."

"I can't leave Knowles behind. I'm supposed to keep her safe." Becker looked up at me and smiled. "I could try to take her and run, but she wouldn't make it very far, and that mouth of hers would get us caught again." He reached for a book on the table next to him and opened it. "No, I'll wait until your people make a trade for us," he said, looking down at the pages.

I nodded in understanding. Earth and the rebels traded prisoners all the time.

Two hours later, I wondered if perhaps I should make sure Montry and Knowles *were* still alive. Becker was still reading by the light of the recently repaired lamp, so I started for the door to search for them, when they stumbled inside. Knowles' clothes were in disarray, and they were

both covered in a light film of sweat. Knowles ignored me as she headed for the stairs up to her room. I looked at Montry. He shrugged and followed her.

I settled into a chair by the front door to keep watch, listening to Becker chuckle softly from where he sat pretending to read.

#

When Montry placed the blindfold over her eyes, Knowles launched into a tirade about the mistreatment of prisoners, and how there were certain codes of conduct civilized combatants were supposed to follow. Montry pointed out that she was not even a combatant, but an accountant, and anyway, everyone knew how poorly Earth's forces treated their prisoners. Compared to that, Montry said, she had been living in the lap of luxury during her imprisonment. Knowles snarled that the rebellious colonists did not deserve to be treated like prisoners of war, but like the common criminals they were.

Through it all, Becker held his tongue, his flat expression never changing.

We trudged toward the river in silence, except for Knowles occasionally grumbling about the blindfold. She allowed herself to be led along the overgrown path by Montry, who guided her with a soft voice and gentle hand while lighting our way. Becker kept a firm grip on my left elbow as I led him down the lantern-lit path. He had not spoken after I placed the blindfold over his eyes. I carried my rifle slung over my right shoulder, away from Becker. As we neared the river, the smell of dank vegetation, stagnant water, and fresh-turned earth filled my nose.

"What's all this?" I heard Montry say ahead of me.

I stepped into the small clearing at the end of the path. Ramirez stood in front of a freshly dug pit with two lanterns suspended on poles over it. He held a pistol at his side. The two men I had seen with him earlier in the day leaned on shovels, both covered in sweat and breathing heavily from exertion. Their rifles were propped against a tree a few feet behind them.

I realized what the fresh dug pit was: a grave. "What's going on?" I asked Ramirez.

Ramirez took Knowles by the arm and pulled her away from Montry. He walked her to the foot of the open grave and stepped behind her.

"What are you doing?" Montry said, starting to move toward

Ramirez. "I thought we ransomed or traded our prisoners?"

Ramirez pointed his pistol at Montry. "Earth forces leveled Columbia City. They killed everyone: men, woman, children, all of them. Six thousand people wiped out because the mayor couldn't tell them who the local rebel leaders were. We're to kill all of our prisoners in retaliation."

Knowles started to whimper and shake.

"I didn't sign up to be a murderer," said Montry.

"This is a war; people kill each other," Ramirez snapped. "*They murdered six thousand people.*"

"So we're to act just like them?" I asked softly.

"Those are my orders," Ramirez said.

"You're not really going to just shoot me, are you?" Knowles said in a shaky voice. "I'm not even a soldier. I've never killed anyone." She started to cry. "Montry, you're not just going to let him kill me, are you? I thought we were friends, I thought—"

Ramirez turned and fired his pistol into her back. The shot echoed across the nearby river. For

a moment Knowles stood still, then she toppled into the grave.

I looked at Ramirez. He was pale and shaking, his breath coming hard and heavy. Over his shoulder I saw Montry fall to his knees and throw up. Ramirez pointed his pistol at me. "Bring the next one," he said in a shaky voice. I hesitated, and Ramirez cocked the hammer back on the pistol. "Now."

I walked Becker to the foot of the grave. "I'm sorry about this," I said, as if somehow that would make everything better. "I didn't know. I thought you were to be traded for prisoners from our side."

"Just do me a favor," Becker said.

"Sure."

"Take this blindfold off me."

I reached up and untied the blindfold while Ramirez held his pistol on us, his hand shaking so badly I thought he might accidentally fire. I could hear Montry being sick.

"There are some papers in my jacket pocket," Becker said, his voice calm and even. "My daughter lives on Perseus; her address is on one of the letters. Could you send them to her and make sure she knows what happened?"

I reached inside his jacket and withdrew the small pouch of papers. "I promise."

"Here now, hurry up," Ramirez whispered.

I heard a low moan and looked into the lantern-lit grave. Knowles, her blood soaking into the moist earth underneath her, was still alive. She clawed at the ground, making gurgling, wheezing noises.

I turned to Ramirez. "For God's sake, do something. Just—finish her."

Ramirez stared down at Knowles, his face shocked. He looked up at me as she gave a

strangled cry. Behind him I saw Montry stand and stumble back up the path toward Widow Somogyi's cottage.

I unslung my rifle and fired a round into her back. She stilled and quieted.

I looked up. Before I could stop him, Ramirez pointed his pistol at the back of Becker's head and fired. The roar of the discharge made my ears ring, and the force of the bullet flung Becker into the grave on top of Knowles.

Ramirez holstered his pistol. "Well, that nastiness is done. I—"

I turned, aimed my rifle at Ramirez, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet hit Ramirez in the chest. He flew from his feet and landed on his back. I pointed the rifle at the other two men. Both held up their hands. I kept them covered as I threw their rifles and Ramirez's pistol into the hole. I made them drop Ramirez into the grave, forced them to fill it, and told them to leave. They disappeared into the night.

I ran back to Widow Somogyi's cottage, stumbling along on my lame foot, stumbling and falling several times in the dark.

I found Montry and the widow in the living room. Montry was kneeling and holding his rosary beads, his mouth working silently. Widow Somogyi knelt next to him, her eyes closed. She opened them as I entered the room. "What happened out there, Fergus? What have you done?" Her voice was filled with accusation.

I dropped the rifle on the floor and walked past her, into the room I shared with Montry. I packed my clothes, placing Becker's papers in my bag and, unable to face Montry, the widow, or even myself, slipped out the backdoor into the darkness.



## MICHAEL MERRIAM

*Michael Merriam has sold short fantasy and science fiction to a variety of magazines, including:*

"A Glint Through Smoke and Flame" to **Ruins**. *Forthcoming, Summer 2007.* "And A Song In Her Hair" in **Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine #26**. *November, 2006.* "Angel Above" in **Lyrice**. *September, 2005 and December, 2005.* "Callooh Callay" in **Worlds of Wonder**. *January, 2006.* "Darkly Through The Light Waters" in **Sorcery and Science #5**. *September, 2005.* "Duel in the Moonlit Snow" in **Gryphonwood**. *June, 2006.* "Far From the Fields" in **Ray Gun Revival #9**. *November, 2006.* "The Foundling" in **Chaos Theory: Tales Askew #8**. *September, 2006.* "Jenny's Magic" in **Beyond Centauri #13**. *July, 2006.* "Melpomene Run" in **Ray Gun Revival #4**. *August, 2006.* "Monday" in **Surprising Stories #13**. *January, 2007.* "Out Among the Singing Void" in **Fictitious Force #3**. *November, 2006.* "Over the Bridge" to **The Harrow**. *Forthcoming.* "Poor Mesk" to **Worlds of Wonder**. *Forthcoming.* "Protect and Serve" to **Bewildering Stories**. *Forthcoming.* "Rainfall" in **Deep Magic #45**. *February, 2006.* "Rija's Tale" in **Gryphonwood #4**. *September, 2005.* "Secret" in **From the Asylum**. *January 2007.* "The Siege of Harnlow" in **Gryphonwood**. *October, 2006.* "The Seige of Harnlow" in **The Best of Gryphonwood 2006 Anthology**. *December, 2006.* "Stopping By" in **Lyrice**. *September, 2006 and December, 2006.*

*Michael's SpecFic poetry sales include:*

"Cindy" in **The Shantytown Anomaly #4**. *January 2007.* "I Took the Tear" to **Illumen**. *Forthcoming, Spring 2007* "In the Void" in **The Shantytown Anomaly #3**. *October, 2006.* "Sixth Son" to **Prism Quarterly**. *Forthcoming.* "Where the Leftovers Go" in **Beyond Centauri #15**. *January, 2007.*

*Michael is also a two-time semi-finalist in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of The Future Contest, and has been nominated for the 2007 James B. Baker Award and a Preditors and Editors Award for Short Fiction. He is an assistant organizer of the Twin Cities Speculative Fiction Network. He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota with his wife and cat.*

# It Happened One Sunday

by Tim Baer

The metallic disk came screaming in over the roof of the church, scattering terrified pigeons everywhere. It barely missed the modest steeple before augering into the parking lot—and Mrs. Bigsby’s car. Later there were some who would say it looked like something out of a bad cable TV movie.

Pastor Gregg was more worried about his new parking lot. He’d spent the better part of twenty-seven months wheedling, cajoling, and begging the money out of the congregation. It had taken a flat tire on Mrs. Bigsby’s new Buick (caused by one of the many potholes), to get the congregation to change its mind—or, rather, it took Mrs. Bigsby (and three minutes of her caterwauling,) to change their minds for them. And now her shiny new Buick was a smoking wreck with a crater in the middle. Pastor Gregg smiled smugly to himself. It was, after all, only poetic justice.

He stepped down off of the front steps of the church where he had been shaking the hands of his congregation as they left Sunday services. He had taken five steps across the walk towards the crash site when several voices in the crowd behind him called him up short.

“Pastor Gregg, no!”

“It’s on fire! You’ll be burned alive!”

“Watch out for little green monsters!”

“I got my shotgun out in the truck. Let me go get it.”

“You’d better stay away from Widow Bigsby’s car! She’ll blame you for that crater!”

Pastor Gregg stopped dead in his tracks. That last shout was dead on. If he took another step closer, it didn’t matter that some weird UFO had

fallen out of the sky and clobbered the car; it’d be his fault. He did a quick about-face and marched back to the front steps of the church.

“I think someone should call the sheriff,” he said.

“Already here, Paul,” came a deep voice from inside the church. “Although, I’m not quite sure what you expect me to do.” The sheriff walked out of the church, the crowd melting before him. Then he stepped out into the sunlight, and squinted at the smoking wreck that had once been a car. He took his sunglasses out of a shirt pocket, wiped them a few times with a handkerchief he had pulled from a back pants pocket, and put them on. “This looks more like something we’d need the *Men in Black* for than something under my jurisdiction.”

“My car!” came the shrill shriek as Mrs. Bigsby finally elbowed and kicked her way through the gathered crowd. “Sheriff, I want you to arrest whoever did this to my car!” She shook her index finger in his face. “If you don’t, I’ll see to it that you get un-elected!”

“Mrs. Bigsby,” he started to say.

“Don’t you ‘Mrs. Bigsby’ me, Earl. I used to change your diaper when I babysat you!” Several people in the crowd sniggered as she grabbed his necktie and dragged him off the stairs. “Now go do your duty!”

“Mrs. Bigsby,” he said again. “It wasn’t a someone who did it. More like a some thing.”

“Earl, what on Earth are you talking about?” she snapped.

“Well, that’s just it, Mrs. Bigsby. It’s not of Earth. It’s a flying saucer. You know—one of them UFOs?”

“Earl,” she said in a disgusted tone, “I told you that reading all those trash science fiction magazines was going to rot your mind. “Now get over—” She stopped talking and started screaming, pointing one bony hand at the crater. A creature walked up out of the crater, chattering at the crowd. The gathered humans gave a collective gasp and fell back into the church, leaving Pastor Gregg and the sheriff alone to confront it.

“Paul, what should we do now?” whispered the sheriff. He stepped back just enough to put the pastor in the front.

Pastor Gregg swallowed hard, and took one step off of the church steps. Holding his hands out, palms open, he advanced on the creature. “We’re peaceful,” he said. “We mean you no harm.”

It stopped a few paces away and looked at him with its big, dark eyes. It cocked its head to one side, then began to chatter at him at a furious pace, gesticulating all the while with its long, spindly arms.

“I’m sorry, son,” said Pastor Gregg. “I don’t understand a lick of what you’re saying.”

It picked up the pace on its chatter, and waved its arms even more wildly.

“Nope, sorry. Not a word. Do you want us to take you to our leader? The mayor is out fishing this morning. We can have the sheriff go round him up for you.”

The alien raised the volume on its chatter and waved its arms in the other direction. It began to bounce lightly on the balls of its feet.

“I’m sorry. I just—” Just then the doorway at the bottom of the church basement stairs burst open and children began to pour out from their Sunday school classes. Talking excitedly, they streamed up the stairs and out into the parking lot, each looking for the appropriate car.

“Whoa, cool!” said several as they came across the smoking ruin of Mrs. Bigsby’s car. One broke off from the pack and darted towards the pastor.

“Hey, Pastor Gregg,” he yelled. “What happened to old Widow Bigsby’s clunker—hey! An alien!”

“Billy, no! Get back,” said Pastor Gregg.

“Billy,” said the sheriff, “you stay away from here.” Billy ignored both of them and kept trotting towards the alien. The alien watched the small boy for a moment, and began the chattering and gesticulating all over again.

In that peculiar manner in which little boys are quite incapable of understanding their mothers when they say things such as, “Clean your room,” or “Take out the trash,” or “For the last time, will you stop biting the cat,” Billy apparently had no trouble understanding the creature in front of him.

“Really? Sure. No prob. C’mon!” Billy waved a come-along hand over his shoulder as he darted down the stairs and into the church basement, the alien hot on his heels. The adults were left standing outside, their mouths hanging open in total surprise. A few minutes later, the boy and the alien came back out. The alien turned to the boy, chattered something, and patted him lightly on the side of one arm. “Aw, weren’t nothin’,” replied Billy. He watched as the alien walked back over to the crater and climbed back down inside. A moment later, the disk flew up out of the hole and streaked off into the sky.

“William Randall Simmons, you come here right now,” said Pastor Gregg. The boy ran over to the pastor. He grabbed the boy’s shoulder and squeezed gently but firmly. “What was that all about?”

“Who, him?” asked Billy, hooking a thumb at the sky. “He just had to use the restroom.”



## **TIM BAER**

*After wasting close to 30 years of his life on Wicca and a life of paganism, Tim, now in his 40s, came to know Messiah in 1998. Since then, he has done as much as possible to make up for those wasted years.*

*A disabled US Navy Desert Storm veteran, he lives in Texas with his wife of 18 years Kathie, his daughter Corey, his son Michael, and a pack of critters.*

*He is currently working for a concrete company, where he is busy playing in the mud with a big truck.*

*When he is not at work, or at home busy pounding out more sci-fi on his laptop, his time is taken up serving his cats, the LORD, his family and his dogs—not quite in that order (but don't tell the cats).*

## Featured Artist: *David Levy*

**Name:** David Levy

**Age:** 23

**Favorite Book / Author:** That would either be *Gödel, Escher, Bach* by Douglas Hofstadter or *The Blind Watchmaker* by Richard Dawkins.

**Favorite Artist:** Can I choose two? Paul Bonner and Rembrandt.

**When did you start creating art?** Since my motor skills allowed me to scribble on paper—probably a year or two old. I started with 3D art when I was 16. A friend in school introduced me to some basic 3D application...come to think about it, that was right about the time my grades started to deteriorate...

**Where should someone go if they wanted to view / buy some of your works?** I don't sell anything I do for personal fun, but my website is open to anyone who's interested in seeing more work of mine or order freelance work. The address is: <http://www.slight-shift.com/>

**What were your early influences?** When I was in my teens and was defining my style I was most influenced by Paul Bonner's work for *Mutant Chronicles*, Blizzard Entertainment's art and designs, and in general all sci-fi and fantasy computer games I came across which were well designed.



**What are your current influences?** Since I feel quite confident with my style now—I'm currently more influenced by technically inclined artists and artwork.

**What inspired the art for the cover?** Well, this is of course the Terran marine, from Starcraft by Blizzard. The marine design is probably one of my favorite character designs. I'd wanted to make a proper tribute to this character for a while and finally had the chance a few months ago. I thought of submitting it to the Blizzard art contest, but unfortunately (and for reasons I can't quite make out) they only accepted art from certain countries.

**Where do you get your inspiration / what inspires you?** Music inspires me to work. A good track will make me want to draw. Music with good atmosphere, listened to while working, completely changes the outcome in my opinion. Of course, the



work of other people also inspires me. I often come across some image that gives me a strong urge to draw or paint.

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

I can't think of a certain moment I would denote as my greatest success—but I find the most rewarding part of my personal work to be getting good feedback from people (be it friends, family, random people on internet forums or even online magazine editors). It certainly makes me want to work more, and I can't omit the fact that it often gives my ego a pat on the back. I still haven't decided whether this last comment is extremely shallow of me or if it's a common stance :)

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

3D in general is where I enjoy the process the most. However, after

spending most days doing 3D at work, I usually find that when I go back to the basic pencil and paper combination I have the most fun. It's also the least concentration demanding - when I draw with a pen or pencil it's mostly automatic—it requires just the right amount of brain usage for me to be completely immersed in the process while not having to strain my brain to come up with technical solutions or creative ideas. It's a kind of therapy really.

**What tool / equipment do you wish you had?**

I've been working with a Wacom tablet for years now. True, not on a daily basis—but still I find it surprising that I don't feel remotely as free with it as I do with traditional mediums (pens, pencils, etc.). I believe that using a Cintique (Wacom's tablet integrated screen) would change that. I would say that a 3D sculpting/texturing application that works intuitively is my topmost wish, but ZBrush 3 is on its way and it looks like they've done a really good job with Pixologic in creating such an application.

**What do you hope to accomplish with your art?**

I want my work to eventually inspire people, excite them, move them, or in general, make any kind of positive impact on their lives. So far only my mom gets excited :)



## Deuces Wild

### In the Lap of the Gods, Part Four

by L. S. King

*When we last left our heroes, they were both trapped in the self-destructing palace of the dead Eridani emperor—Tristan in the sublevels, and Slap locked in an audience chamber, along with another prisoner, Kebba.*

An explosion elsewhere in the palace shook the whole room, knocking Slap onto his back. He struggled to rise, not an easy feat with the beam still manacled to his wrists. “Kebba! Get the keys and get this thing off me, please?”

The native groped on the body of the dead guard by his feet and rushed to kneel at Slap’s side. He ran the key card over the slot. “If we will die anyway, why do you care?”

The beam clattered to the floor, and Slap held his hands up in front of him, gazing at the bloody mess that used to be his wrists. From the dawning awareness of pain assaulting his body, the adrenaline was waning. He began to shiver. “Dunno. Just...the feeling of being free, I guess.”

Another thunderous rumble shook the chamber. Slap stood. Only a few minutes ago, he had wished to die, now he wanted to live. But how? The door was sealed. Wait—he grabbed the key card from Kebba and ran to the door. “You give up too easily,” he called over his shoulder as he swiped the card.

Nothing.

He tried again, growled in frustration, and finally banged on the door with his fists. There must be something, some way—he swung around and almost tripped on a guard’s body. The particle beam rifles! He snatched up the weapon from

the dead guard and ran back from the archway. Raising the rifle, he fired until the door melted into hunks of white-hot metal. “C’mon!”

He jumped through the smoldering hole and waited for Kebba. “How do we get out?”

“Follow me!”

Slap did, trying to keep his footing as the building boomed and shuddered. They turned a corner and saw several servants huddled, crying. He hauled them to their feet. The servants cringed away from him. “We’re getting out. You understand? Follow. Kebba, tell them!”

The native called to them and gestured. They chattered an answer. He shook his head at Slap. “They say stone fell and blocked the way.”

“Let’s see if we can unblock it! Show me where.”

They ran down another passage. Slap stared at the damage. Not just stone blocking the way, the whole area was gone. Brago’s Bands, there had to be a way! Part of the floor had given way here, leaving a gaping hole. “What level are we on? How high?”

“Two above ground.” Slap knelt and looked down the hole. The passage below was piled with stone as well. “I’m going to take a look below. We might be able to get out this way.” He slung the rifle over his shoulder and carefully lowered himself. The ersatz stair held, and he squatted to peer into the hall. The way looked clear, but they had to move fast. The booming was increasing. This place was ready to finish falling around them. He scrambled back up and beckoned them. “C’mon.”

He stood at the bottom and helped the natives down. The first one flinched from his touch, but he steadied her as she slipped. Her dark eyes wide, she allowed him to hold her hand the rest of the way down. The male servant said something to Kebba who translated, "There are two stairs near here. The south one is closer."

"Let's try it."

The servant led the way and, day of miracles, the stairway was clear. He heard the roaring of many people shouting and shrieking as they descended to the main level. He didn't know fear could be a tangible thing—a smell, a feeling in the air—but it was. Servants and guards clamored at the now-sealed exit. Slap met Kebba's eye and nodded at the rifle and the door. Kebba yelled, pushing through, trying to get the mob to back away.

He wasn't very effective. Slap took a deep breath and gave a wild cowboy whoop—the kind he used when rounding up cattle. Some turned to look at him and shoved at others with fearful expressions. Warning against the wild barbarian, he supposed. He must look the part, naked and unshaven. He climbed onto a fallen block of stone and whooped again. More turned, and now Kebba's voice could be heard. They all backed away, and Slap fired. Nothing happened. He stared for a second, and it hit him—a force screen guarded the door.

"Can't any of the guards override that thing?" he called to Kebba, widening his stance to stay on his feet. A giant boom rocked the building, and the wall to Slap's right began to crumble. He hollered for folks to move, but too late; part of the wall crushed several people—including the girl he'd helped earlier. In what seemed slow motion he saw her agonized eyes as she disappeared under the rubble. Only a hand remained visible as the dust settled.

No! With a growl of rage, he aimed the rifle

at the computer console on the wall between two buttresses near the door and locked it on. With a shock, he realized he'd done just the right thing—the shield only covered the door. But only the surface shattered; the rifle didn't have the power to break through the thick wall.

A guard ran forward, yelling, and fired his rifle. The other guards joined him, sweeping the wall until it disintegrated. The mob crushed toward the hole, some getting burned as they pushed their way outside.

Slap stopped for a second and knelt to touch the delicate hand of the dead girl with the dark eyes. "Sorry," he muttered. He jumped up and bolted for the hole.

He stumbled once in the courtyard and hands grabbed at his arms, bracing him. The crowd ran, some screaming, toward the outer gates. The guards were long gone.

Once beyond the walls of the palace, Slap and the others turned. Clouds of smoke, debris, and dust obliterated the sun. Most of the palace had already collapsed. The center of the structure, where they had been, was the last to go, as if the destruction had worked its way inward.

Several people pulled on Slap, murmuring to him, urging him to move farther away. He let himself be led through a small square archway without a door. He ducked under the low frame and down stairs. At first he thought it was a cellar, but no, those around him continued on, leading him through one tunnel, then another. Finally they came out into a large, well-lit cave. He was taken to one of the small, curtained openings lining one side and found himself in a small room. It contained several small wooden stools, and shelves along a wall. One person beckoned to Slap and pointed to a stool.

He sat—gingerly; though his anatomy no longer bled, being forced to cooperate with Nadi had left deep bruising. His body trembled.

And—now that escaping death wasn't overriding everything else—he blushed as he realized anew he wasn't wearing anything. A woman held out a cup of water. He gulped it down.

Kebba stepped forward. "They want to know what you need."

Slap glanced around at the men. They wore loose pants and tunics. He looked down at himself and doubted they had clothes in his size. "A blanket."

One blanket was set over his lap, and another draped over his back. Ask for one, get two. Slap wasn't going to complain. Another woman knelt before him and began to clean and bandage his arms. Her touch was gentle, but still he clenched his teeth to keep from wincing. The wounds went deep.

Clothes were shoved at Kebba, and while dressing, he began talking a mile a minute. As he did, the folks crowding by the door grew silent. This Kebba had a charisma about him, despite his mutilated appearance. The woman in front of Slap paused occasionally as she worked to give her charge an awed glance. Kebba finished speaking and, in the silence, everyone looked at Slap. He gazed at the floor between his feet to avoid the stares.

After his wrists were bound, Slap was given a bowl of some sort of soup and a piece of dark, heavy bread. He balanced the bowl on his knees and ate slowly, dipping the bread in the broth. He'd not had much to eat while a prisoner and didn't want his stomach to rebel. He met Kebba's eyes. "What did you say to them?" Slap asked, swallowing a bite.

"I told them how you broke free and attacked that false god of an emperor. How you saved us. You have come from the gods."

Slap nearly choked. "Brago's Bands! I wasn't sent by no gods. I'm a cowboy. And I'm only here because your emperor kidnapped me to use as

bait for my friend. You were the one who killed Istvan and Nadi."

"Only because of you. The guards were watching you, not me, so I had a chance to grab a rifle."

"I'm a barbarian, remember? The one your people spit on when I was brought here."

"You look like a barbarian, and do not speak the gods' tongue, but you are not a barbarian. No barbarian could have done what you did."

"Ugh." Slap rolled his eyes. "I ain't gonna argue. Got no energy left."

Kebba nodded. "Yes, you must be tired. When you finish eating, we shall find you a bed."

"That'd be real nice."

#

It wasn't a proper bed, only mats piled high against the wall opposite the door, and not long enough for his tall frame, but despite all that, Slap curled up and found it indecently soft. He was asleep almost before the woman who had been hovering over him covered him up.

He awoke alone. His muscles ached, his wrists throbbed, and he was acutely aware of other parts of his body, too. He fought down the humiliation and rage at his memory of the indignities forced on him. Nadi was dead, buried under heaps of rock, but it wasn't enough. He took a deep breath, trying to shake off the trembling fury, and sat up. The Zendians had tried to teach him about giving those sorts of feelings away when his family had died. But he hadn't wanted to listen to the aliens' philosophy. Still didn't. He swallowed and looked around.

A stool by the bed held folded clothes. The loose-fitting pants were snug, and both the pants and tunic a bit short, but at least he didn't have to wrap a blanket around himself now. He wondered how long he had slept.

Light came from beyond the curtained archway.

He ducked through into a...a courtyard was all he could call it, despite being underground. He would have expected torches or something more archaic, but niche lights set into the walls illuminated the place quite well. But that was about the only modern device he saw. In the center, a winch perched over a hole circled by rocks in the stone floor marked a well. Beehive ovens squatted in a wide half circle around this centerpiece.

Two women attended the cooking, wearing robes that wrapped around their bodies and over their shoulders and heads. One was the woman who'd mothered him; she was taking bread out of one of the beehive ovens on the far side with a long-handled paddle. The other knelt by coals, cooking something in a shallow pan. Several children ran about, laughing and chasing each other around the scattered stone benches and tables. They saw Slap and stopped, gaping. The only thing missing was livestock.

A man stood near the archway. He bowed to Slap.

"Uh, howdy." Slap squinted around the courtyard. "Uh, is Kebba around?"

The man repeated Kebba's name and, while continuing to talk, pointed away. Slap nodded. He got enough to know Kebba wasn't there.

The baking woman approached Slap and, with much bowing, touched his bandaged wrists, speaking in a soft voice, her eyes questioning.

"They'll be fine, most likely, ma'am. Thank you." He ducked his head at her, wishing he had a hat to tip.

She lifted her head slightly, perhaps acknowledging his thanks, and gestured for him to follow her across the courtyard. She opened a curtain to reveal a tiny chamber. He bent to enter. The facilities were a bit basic, but he wasn't picky. He could take care of a need he hadn't known how to express, especially in front of ladies. A basin of water sat on a ledge. Ah, good, he could wash as

well. He smiled and nodded. She let the curtain fall and left.

Slap emerged, still dripping water off his bearded chin. He needed somehow to ask for a razor next time. And a toothbrush.

The same woman gestured to a table. An earthenware plate with slices of fried, red something waited for him. He sat, glancing at the woman, wondering how to ask for a fork. She bowed, backing up, her eyes averted. He sighed. Right. Fingers it was. Slap gingerly picked up a slice; hot, but not too hot. It tasted like sweet potato. Not bad.

Sounds of talking echoed in the cavern, and before long Kebba entered with three other men. They all were bald and dressed in silks similar to the stuff he'd seen Istvan wear, long robes over pants, with sashes at the waist.

The whole bunch of them bowed before approaching. Kebba stepped forward. "We...we don't know your name."

"Slap."

"S-Slap?" Kebba asked, his brow furrowing.

"Yep."

"We would like you to come with us, Slap."

Slap slowly straightened, wary, gazing at Kebba's earnest expression. They had been nice to him, but they were the same people who had spit on him. Look at Nadi. She had seemed nice the first time he met her... "Why?"

"We are having a...meeting. My people wish to meet you. To thank you for helping them."

"Um. No need. I mean, you've all been swell. But I need to find—"

"Please!"

Slap glanced at the remaining food on the plate and rose with a sigh. The woman rushed forward and spoke strongly to the men, pointing to Slap. They dropped their heads, murmuring what had to be apologies. It didn't take knowing a language to see when a woman had cowed

a passel of men. She came around the end of the table and, reaching way up, pushed down on Slap's shoulders. He obeyed. She pointed to the food and told him to eat with mother-cluck scoldings—another thing that sounded the same even if you didn't know the language.

"Yes, Mother," he said with a small smile.

#

Slap found himself led through tunnels and into a large cavern, much larger than the one he'd been in. But the one end was an open cliff into a canyon, the sun shining, making him blink. Steps were carved into the face of the canyon, some leading up, and others down. The opposite wall of the canyon had openings and caverns as well. Like a neighborhood or village built into the ground, away from the blasting sand. He also saw steps through an open arch, going back into the rock. Perhaps into other chambers, or to other courtyard areas.

This place looked even more like a courtyard, animals and all; chickens scratched and bobbed, and a goat chewed something, staring malevolently at its surroundings. A dog padded after a boy. In the center, a round fountain provided running water. A few low troughs at the back of the chamber had fodder in them, and others water. So perhaps the animals didn't share the water from the fountain. That was good to know.

Most of the activity in the courtyard ceased, and they all turned to look at Slap. His face grew warm. The men hustled him across and to more tunnels, then stairs. Finally they emerged on the surface into the midst of an enormous compound. Buildings surrounded them, which was just as well, because the wind gusted, occasionally spinning up sand. Slap wouldn't want to be someplace without a windbreak if the weather got wild.

Under a tent near the center of the courtyard, a group of men waited, bald like the others and

wearing the fancy silk clothes like Kebba and his buddies. Slap's mouth watered as he eyed baskets of fruit sitting on the tables.

"These are the priests." Kebba gestured broadly. "They all wanted to see you."

"You're dressed like them. You a priest too?"

"Yes. That murdering dog is now dead, so I am restored as a priest."

Slap blinked. "Now wait. You—but why would he treat one of his own priests that way?"

"Because I knew the truth. We all do, of course. But I was careless and was observed mocking him by one of his spies."

Slap shrugged. Made sense. Well, as much sense as anything on this planet. Things were much simpler back home.

Kebba turned to the other priests and talked in their tongue. The only thing Slap understood was his own name—repeated more than once.

Self-conscious, Slap dug the ground with his foot and stared at the buildings. They all had a rounded design, but whether that was intentional, or from the sand scouring them for a long time, he had no clue. He hip-sat on the edge of a table under the tent and made crosshatch patterns with his toe.

The priests continued to talk, sometimes quietly, sometimes more animatedly. Slap yawned and stood. He grabbed an apple from one of the baskets. Where on this planet would they grow apples? All he'd seen was desert so far. He sank his teeth into the fruit; it was sweet and crisp. He closed his eyes in enjoyment.

Munching away, he began to wander around.

The men still talked, curious glances thrown in his direction. He strolled about and, after passing several buildings, heard a noise that caused his heart to beat faster—a horse snorting.

He followed the sound and found a huge corral—well, he might as well call it a corral; it was fenced, although by some metal mesh not

split rails. Inside, the most glorious stallion Slap had ever seen pranced around the circumference, his mane and tail plumed, muscular neck arched, muscles rippling. He was a coppery sorrel with a creamy mane and tail, deep through the withers and with powerful hindquarters. Slap rested an elbow on the top of the fence, and whistled. The horse jumped and skittered back, then resumed prancing.

Huh. He'd need persuading. Slap hurried back to the center of the compound, snagged two more apples, and headed back, finishing the fruit he'd been chewing on.

Slap entered and closed the gate. He tossed the apple core over his shoulder and took a few steps toward the horse. He and the beast stared at each other. For the first time in a long time Slap felt at home. "Hello, boy," he said in a soothing tone. "We gonna be friends?"

The horse snorted again and shook his head, as if for all the world he knew what Slap was saying to him. Slap grinned. "You look like you need a friend as much as I do. But friends need names. So what's yours, huh? Príncipe. That's your name. We gonna be friends, Príncipe?"

Slap took one step closer, and Príncipe flattened his ears and stamped his feet. Slap took a bite of the apple as he regarded him evenly. He continued to chew as he waited for Príncipe to get used to where he stood. He took another step, waited for Príncipe to calm down, and took another step. When finally he was within touching distance, he held out the apple on his palm.

Príncipe blew, arched his neck, and danced away. Slap didn't move. Twice he trotted closer and snuffled at the apple, but tossed his head and skittered back. Finally, the third time, he took the offering. As Príncipe crunched the fruit, Slap murmured, "We're gonna be good friends, boy. You're a beauty. Got good blood in you. Yeah, you're a fine one. Bet you fairly fly over the

ground."

Príncipe nudged him for more apple, and Slap reached up and patted his neck. Príncipe nudged again, put his nose in Slap's armpit, and blew. Slap chuckled. "Yep. We're friends now, ain't we?"

Slap continued with his breaking patter, as he rubbed and patted the horse's neck, and scratched his ears and between his eyes. Príncipe leaned toward him, nickering, and Slap rested his head on the stallion's neck for a moment, inhaling the wonderful smell of horse.

He fed him the second apple, still scratching and softly talking to the animal. Before long, he walked back a step. Príncipe followed, his ears still flicking back and forth. Slap began walking, and the stallion stayed with him. He stopped, rubbing and patting the horse's neck again. Then he started walking once more.

He repeated this scenario, wishing he had a saddle or at least a blanket. He didn't know how used to riding Príncipe was, or how skittish he'd be if Slap just leaped onto his back. Pa always said Slap had a way with horses. "Hope you're right, Pa," he muttered.

More walking and soft patter worked their charm and made Príncipe comfortable; his stance, eyes, ears—all his body language—gave Slap his cue. "We're gonna try a new trick, boy. I'm gonna tickle myself onto your back, and then you know what we're going to do? We're gonna fly together. You like that idea?"

Slap put both hands on Príncipe's back and pressed. The horse stood. He hopped a little the next time, pressing harder. Príncipe's ears flipped a bit, and he looked around as if asking Slap what he was doing. He repeated the hops several more times. Príncipe seemed unimpressed. If there had been grass in the compound, he'd probably be grazing.

Slap's aching muscles all told him mounting wasn't going to be easy. But now was the time.

He leaped and settled on Príncipe's back. The stallion jumped and sidestepped, ears flicking back. But he didn't buck or rear. Slap sat still, petting his neck, talking to him—concentrating on the animal, not how straddling the horse brought a fresh reminder of the torture he endured. The pain would fade. If only his memories could fade too. And the burning fury. He took a deep breath, staring at the stallion's upright ears. *The horse—concentrate on him!*

He sat for a moment in pure enjoyment. Nothing in the world felt like this—the muscles, the energy, the aliveness of the horse beneath him. Grabbing the mane and using his legs, Slap clicked his tongue. Príncipe took a step, arching his neck. Slap tried again, nudging harder with his knees. Príncipe walked, tossing his head. Slap wanted to howl and whoop, but merely grinned.

Before long he had Príncipe trotting and leaned forward to whisper to him, "Time to fly, boy!" He gripped the mane tighter, dug with his heels, and yelled, "Ha!"

With a leap, Príncipe took off at a full gallop—the hot wind whipping in Slap's face. Exhilaration filled him, a shrieking joy that flooded his body at sensing the stallion's power released; Slap laughed aloud. They circled the corral several times before Slap tried turning him. Sweet! He turned him left and right, loping in a weaving pattern. Príncipe responded like they'd been working together for years. Oh, he missed this!

As they galloped around the perimeter again, Slap saw Kebba and the priests standing outside the fence, watching, mouths open. With a soft "Whoa," he brought Príncipe to a walk and approached the men, grinning. He patted Príncipe's neck. "He's a beauty. I didn't know you had any horses on this planet."

The priests all bowed very low.

Kebba slowly straightened. His voice was soft. "We would like to take you to our temple."

Visions of human sacrifice came to Slap's mind, and he muttered an earthy word. "I...don't see why you'd want me to go to your temple."

"We wish to honor you?"

"H-honor me?" Slap gulped. *On an altar?*

"Please, it will not take long. Then we shall take you to rest. I know you must be weary."

*That's better—doesn't sound like a one-way trip.* But still... "Look, I didn't do anything. You did as much or more."

"You are most humble. But please," Kebba went down on one knee, "let us thank you and honor you."

Slap sighed. He swung a leg over Príncipe's neck and dismounted. Kebba was going to be a burr under his saddle until he got his way. He scratched between Príncipe's eyes and muttered, "G'bye, boy."

Príncipe whinnied as Slap exited the corral. He smiled back at the stallion before following the priests.

#

Slap ascended the stairs from the tunnel, walked through the archway, and gaped.

The structure in front of him had to be the biggest building he'd ever seen, totally comprised of white marble and gold. The front portion, a tiered structure with columns all around it, stood at least ten stories high and looked to cover over half a mile square. Rising behind it, a huge, four-sided stepped edifice blacked out the sky, and on every section of block on every 'step' stood a statue of someone or some animal. This thing made the palace seem like a shack.

The people lining the sides of the stairs must number in the hundreds or maybe thousands.

Slap turned to Kebba. "Is this your temple?"

"Yes."

"Brago's Bands!" He gaped for another second then asked, "How come it doesn't look weathered?"

From sandstorms and such?”

“Force screen. The peasants are told the gods protect it.” Kebba chuckled. “Technology is wonderful, is it not?”

The priests surrounded him almost like guards—making his worry meter go up—as they approached the steps. He looked up, and up, at the colonnade far above, wondering if he could manage that distance. But a golden hovering platform with carved, gilded rails floated over, a priest at the controls, and the men urged him into it. They rose slowly, almost skimming the steps. The people bowed as they passed.

They rode through the colonnade and disembarked to take a lift. Exiting, Slap found himself in a room with wardrobes, and screens partially hiding sunken tubs.

“What’s all this?”

“We wish you to be clean and comfortable. Please.” Kebba waved Slap to enter. A servant standing by a tub of steaming water bowed. “We shall leave you to be ministered to.” He and his companions bowed and backed out the door.

Slap couldn’t argue; he needed to wash. The small basin hadn’t allowed much, and after... however much time since he’d been captured and tortured, he even offended himself. Oh, he’d been hosed down of waste and blood from time to time in between Nadi’s ‘attentions,’ but that didn’t count as being washed.

A servant stepped forward and pulled on Slap’s tunic.

“Oh no, no, friend,” Slap said, shaking his head. “I can do it myself.” He drew a screen forward and shooed the servants away. He didn’t know what to do about the bandages, just take them off, he guessed. Despite various wounds stinging worse than bees, the bath felt like heaven. The scented water reminded him of when he first met Tristan, and the scam they pulled to get off the planet. He paused while washing. Where was Tristan?

He blinked and shrugged. His friend would likely soon find him.

When he got out, a servant stepped around the screen and draped him in a robe before he knew what was happening. He then rewrapped Slap’s wrists in fresh bandages, solving that dilemma. Afterwards two more servants came over with beautiful silk garments in bright colors. Waving them away with his hands, he dressed himself. The pants and tunic were easy, but the sash... A servant timidly approached as he got snagged winding the seemingly endless piece of material and helped him tie it correctly. Over all he shrugged on the long robe

More leading and gesturing and bowing—did these folks ever stop bowing?—and soon Slap found himself in a gilded hall slightly reminiscent of the palace’s audience chamber, except this place was monstrous in size. Pillars and statues lined the length of room, and it reeked of incense. His stomach shuddered slightly as the odor brought the nightmarish memories vividly back.

Men dressed in attire similar to Kebba and his companions lined the huge hall. *They must all be priests.* Kebba and another man flanked Slap and walked him to the other end. There they turned him about, and several priests came forward. One opened a small box as he began speaking to the assembly. Inside lay a gold medallion on a heavy chain. In the midst of his lecture—sermon—whatever, the doors at the far end of the hall opened, and a loud, angry voice called out.

A richly dressed man with a sullen expression strode forward, protected by a dozen well-armed, muscular guards. The priests turned.

“What is this nonsense, Kebba?” the man asked, his lip curling very much like Istvan’s. “You would make a god of this barbarian?”

“Huh?” Slap frowned at the mutilated priest and took a step backward. “What’s going on here?”

Kebba waved his hand at Slap in a shushing manner. "I saw what he did. He pulled the ceiling down. He crushed your cousin's face."

"Now, wait-a-minute! I broke his nose, sure, but—" Slap stopped and stared at the newcomer with unease. "Cousin?" Oh yes, the dark, taunting eyes were the same.

"And new emperor." The man jerked up his chin.

"It is not confirmed, Abbra. Our fate is in the lap of the gods, not men."

"The gods! Ha! You pretentious charlatan! I am the chosen of the gods and I will take my place as emperor. And as a god!" He sneered at Slap. "And I will not be usurped by some false god of a barbarian."

"Now, wait—" Slap began, but Kebba cut him off: "It is for the gods to decide! Can you ride the emperor's own mount? No one may approach him. You know yourself he is a demon who can be tamed only by a god." Kebba pointed at Slap. "I saw him ride the creature. We all did! The gods have chosen!"

"Then I declare war on you, the gods, and this barbarian!" Abbra pulled a needlegun from under his robe and aimed it at Slap.



Stay tuned as *Deuces Wild* continues next month  
with part five of:  
"In the Lap of the Gods"

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

## 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 gardening, 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 Jolly RGR

Up next for Ray Gun Revival, Issue 20

## **WHO KNOWS?**

by Unknown

*Your story could be here.*

## **SERIAL: JASPER SQUAD**

by Paul Christian Glenn

*What happens next is a mystery!*

## **SERIAL: THE ADVENTURES OF THE SKY PIRATE CHAPTER 10, CLIFFHANGER**

by Johne Cook

*Year Two at the Haddirron Naval Academy finds Chain working on the mysterious flevi-  
tation formula without any progress, Darden is up to no good, and roommates Flynn  
and Pitt have both attracted the attention of Deena Prentiss, a fiery Physician candi-  
date.*

## **FEATURED ARTIST**

## **SERIAL: MEMORY WIPE, CHAPTER 10**

by Sean T. M. Stiennon