

Six Lights off Green Scar

a short story

by Gareth L Powell

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Roulette ships were dangerous and sexy. They were small and fast and tough. Their hulls were black tungsten alloy laced with smart carbon filament. They looked a bit like flint arrowheads. The media called them "roulette" ships because they were used for random jumping.

Random jumping was an extreme sport. It was the ultimate gamble. It was a pilot throwing his craft into hyperspace on a random trajectory, just to see where he'd end up.

Some discovered habitable planets, or rich mineral deposits. They became celebrities. They brought back wild tales of bizarre planetary systems, of swollen stars and uncharted asteroid belts.

But the risks were huge. Roulette pilots gambled with their lives, and there were ugly rumours of ghost ships, of murder and cannibalism, and individuals dying lonely, lingering deaths in distant star systems.

Those lucky enough to find their way home clustered on worlds close to the edge of familiar space, where they could stand under the clear night sky and see the unexplored frontier stretching away before them. Pik Station was one such world. It was a dirty little outpost on a half-forgotten moon. Its buildings were low and squalid, like bunkers. Down by the spaceport, drifters and tired hustlers worked its narrow streets. They huddled at its windy intersections in flapping coats, waiting for the right deal, the big score.

Sal Dervish moved among them, avoiding the ebb and flow of their skinny bodies. He wore a heavy coat and a set of stained ship fatigues. His breath came in ragged clouds and his insulated boots crunched solidly on the icy ground. He was the master of the *Wild Cat*, an old roulette ship in storage at the port. She needed an overhaul but he couldn't afford it. Some days, he could hardly afford to eat.

The bar he was heading for was a squat, scrappy affair, built of packing crates and corrugated iron. Whenever a shuttle lifted from the port, its walls and windows shook. As he opened the door, a woman detached herself from the counter and came over.

'Captain Dervish?' She had a reedy accent and wore a smart green parka with the hood thrown back.

He squinted. 'Are you Vance?'

She took his elbow and guided him to a table near the fireplace, where two glasses and a bottle of local rot had been laid out.

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