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Opening Extract from...

From Darkest Skies

Written by Sam Peters

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FROM DARKEST SKIES

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For Pete, Nigel, Sam, Ali, Alex, Tony and John

ONE

EDDIE AND THE SHAH

1

EXIT PAPERS

Memories are like hibernating bears. They disappear into some dark cave until you forget they were ever there, and that's when they wake up and roar.

The Fleet officer on the other side of the desk pinged a series of files to my Servant. She didn't look up and I didn't bother reading them. Most of me wasn't even in the room. Most of me was back on Magenta, seven years ago, lying in a bed in a skyboat cabin, not daring to move because Alysha was sleeping on my arm and I didn't want to wake her. The sun outside our window was rising over a purple sea of broken ice, glorious, dazzling and wonderful, but I was turned the other way, looking at Alysha's face, lost in the moment, her skin aglow in that dawn light, eyes closed, hair like fire. We'd decided to start a family.

'You have twenty-four hours to leave the Gibraltar Extranational Territory. After that time you will be subject to arrest and internment. Agent Rause, do you understand?'

I tried to shake Alysha away by staring at the desk. An

antique from the early twentieth century or else a very fine replica. Eventually I managed a nod.

'A shuttle will take you to orbit at 0900 hours for transfer to the *Fearless* and your return to Magenta. You are dismissed and discharged.' The woman looked up at me, a long hard glance of hostile steel. Maybe she was hoping for a confession she sure as hell wasn't going to get. 'Whatever your government decides to do next, that's up to them. I hope they bury you.'

I stood a moment longer, wallowing in memory, numbness turning to lead-limbed dread. I was out. Just like that, lost in a Magenta sunrise, golden light pouring across Alysha's sleeping face. I was going home. It wasn't what I'd wanted. I'd fled to Earth for a reason.

The door shut behind me as I left. Sixteen hours to pack and go, the last five years of my life abruptly brought to an end. I should have handed in my papers the day the bomber calling himself Loki got stabbed to death in prison, but I hadn't, and a day had become a week had become a month, then six, then a year.

Back to Magenta, to where Loki had blown up my Alysha.

My Servant flicked through the news while I summoned a pod to the Gibraltar Spire. An Entropist attack on the *Defiance* out of Arcon was grabbing the Fleet headlines, but I didn't work for them any more so I skimmed it and threw it away. I took the elevator to the spire's observation deck; out on the balcony I savoured the view, looking down for the last time at burnished chrome towers and the reinforced concrete that cloaked Gibraltar Rock from top to bottom. Polished and slick on the outside, rotten underneath. That was Earth for you.

There were other places I could go. Other worlds …

'Hi, Keys.' My Servant's hidden personality bloomed into life. Alysha's voice, whispering in my ear like a lover.

'Hi, Liss.' The sound of her crumpled me like a punctured balloon, the tension of the last weeks suddenly gone.

‘Give me a moment.’

It took her a few seconds to catch up. She was like that when she’d been asleep for a while, integrating every sensation, every newsfeed, every sight and sound into her memory, unravelling the world’s progress since she was last awake. Liss. Alysha. Back when I first knew Alysha, everyone called her Al; but she’d told me one night, early on, before we were sleeping together, that she hated it, that it reminded her of Fat Al the barman at the Chopstick where half the bureau agents went after work. We’d tried Ally for a few days, but she’d hated that even more, and so we’d settled on Liss. Data and algorithms, that’s what Liss was now, but she hadn’t always been that way. It can be hard to see a simulation for what it is if the simulation is good enough.

‘So we’re going back then?’ she asked, although it wasn’t much of a question. It wasn’t as if I was being given a choice. I closed my eyes and imagined the real Alysha leaning against the rail beside me. Right there on top of the Gibraltar Spire, close enough to touch, a physical presence, the fingers of her hand resting lightly on my own, a quiet togetherness, soaking it all in. Over the Mosque of the Two Holy Custodians to the south was the North African coast. A six-mile Masters’ tower rose from the waves there. Alysha would have liked that. We all go through our years of obsession with the Masters and she’d never quite grown out of it, but the real Alysha had been dead for five years, and I was staring not to the south but to the north, across the endless blue waters of the New Spanish Sea.

There was a lump in my throat. A light blinked in my eye. Liss had finished her assimilation.

‘I had to turn you off for the inquiry,’ I said. ‘I couldn’t risk Fleet finding you. They’ve been all over me since the Tech-Fair.’

She paused as if catching her breath. ‘I don’t mind.’

‘I’m going to miss this, you know. This view.’ The north face

of Gibraltar sprawled beneath the balcony, concrete terraces and dazzling metal as far as the sheer perfect cliff into the sea where Spain had once been.

'I know it's not the way you wanted it to end, but—'

'Which bit? The part where a priceless Masters artefact got stolen from under my nose, or do you mean the bit just before, when I got blown up?' I didn't remember much from after the explosion. I'd been lucky. Concussion and a lot of bruising but no serious injury. I certainly didn't want to talk about it. I'd had enough of that from Fleet these last three weeks. 'I didn't want it to end at all, Liss. I was happy here.'

She had the grace not to point out the lie.

'Why do you suppose the Masters left Gibraltar alone?' she asked instead. 'Why just one little rock?'

'Why did they do anything?'

Further along the balcony a pair of telescopes pivoted on the safety rails, but even with their thousandfold magnification the sky and the New Spanish Sea merged into a white haze long before the Pyrenees coast far to the north. I looked down to where the sun blazed back at me from a thousand dazzling reflections. A Yen-Shu lifter carrying an orbital shuttle was taking off from the pad beneath the spire, rising on an array of enclosed rotors. It powered away across the water.

'Do you ever wonder what happened to the people who lived here?' Liss asked. I didn't need to. No one did. We'd still had a few vestigial satellites back then, hiding as space junk. The world had watched as the Iberian Peninsula disintegrated, every atom of solid matter above sea level and a few yards below turned into vapour all the way to the Pyrenees. Seven hours, more or less, was all it had taken. A whole country gone. All except the rock of Gibraltar.

I made a face. 'No. Do you?' Two countries, I reminded myself. Everyone always forgot Portugal.

'Not the way I used to.'

Liss's voice was bland. Not sad, the way I'd always expected it to be back in the early days when I'd first turned her on – I'd soon understood that ambivalence to her own condition was ingrained into her algorithms.

'It wasn't only here,' she said.

'I know.' The Masters had changed the shape of the planet. The casualty estimate later, when we'd recovered enough to count, was five billion dead. It had taken them about a week. When they were done they'd carved a pattern of deep sea trenches so immensely intricate that we didn't have proper maps of them even now. Some of the trenches went down twenty miles and more. They'd sculpted other worlds too: Mercury, Venus, Titan. The list went on.

'Do you ever wonder what it was all for?' I asked. '*Can* you?'

Liss made a sad laughing sound, peculiar, like the call of some timid night-time creature. It was her own sound, that laugh, not a copy of the real woman Alysha had once been. 'Keon, do you think there's anyone who doesn't? I know I did back when I was alive. I think I wondered about it a lot. But I don't remember. It's just a feeling. Or an inference, if you prefer.'

'You didn't talk about it much.'

'"Nations divided, smiling lies, blind deaf and dumb to the terror to come, from darkest skies." I think I must have made everyone I knew read that awful poem about the coming of the Masters.'

'Yes.' I made a face.

'It mattered to me, I think.'

I basked in the heat, watching the Yen-Shu labour out across the sea and up into the sky, thoughts drifting away among the stars. Other lifters came and went from the pads below. Little ones, mostly.

Liss. I wanted to reach out and touch her, but she wasn't real.

‘The Masters started extra-solar colonisation five years later. Why did they do *that*? Or, if you like it better the other way round, why did they wait so long?’ Her voice dropped. Quieter. More intimate. ‘What was any of it for? We all wonder, Keys. How can we not?’

‘The last person born before Liberation Day died a month ago. A hundred and fifty-two years old. The Masters are gone. We’ll forget. That’s what humans do. We move on.’

‘The past is the past. It’s not a place to live.’ Her voice changed, shaking off dusty cobwebs of wistful ennui. I wondered sometimes: did she have a special algorithm for that, and if she did, could I have it too? ‘So this is it?’ she chirped. ‘We’re going home?’

Half a mile into the sky the Yen-Shu dropped its shuttle and veered away. The shuttle fell like a cormorant diving for a fish, then levelled and flared sun-bright as its fusion engines ignited. It soared upward on a graceful arc of vapour. ‘That’s us tomorrow,’ I said. ‘Sixteen hours to get out. Fifteen and a half now.’ The dim rumble of a sonic boom reached the spire. The flare of the shuttle vanished into the sky. I wanted to go back to the apartment where Liss had her shell, to where I could see her, touch her … but I couldn’t tear myself away from the sun. This was the last time I’d ever stand here, perhaps the last time I’d ever see Earth.

‘It’s not your fault, you know,’ she said. ‘Any of it.’

I did know, but that didn’t make it any better. ‘Give me a minute alone up here, will you?’

‘I’ll wait for you back home.’

She flitted away, slipping out of my Servant into the ether, a sudden emptiness. I closed my eyes and pictured my Alysha walking away, stopping and turning to face me, hands on her hips, head cocked sideways the way I remembered her most clearly. There was something coquettish about her when she

did that. Five years and I could almost believe she was back, really here; five years and I still felt the loss of her as keenly as in the days after she died; but when I opened my eyes there was only the bright empty sky.

Going back. I made a resolution to myself. The same resolution I'd made a hundred times over. I was going to find out what had happened. I was going to find out who had done this to us and why. So I didn't care what Fleet thought I'd done because none of that mattered. I was going to put Alysha to rest … Except I wasn't. There was no one to hunt and uncover and punish, no place to exact revenge. That had all happened years ago.

I took the glass-bubble lift down the spire and stared across the old straits towards the African coast with its tower. The Masters had built it in the last days, long after they'd scattered us across the thirty-seven colony worlds. Thrusting six miles into the sky, scratching at the stratosphere. The start of a space elevator, maybe? No one knew for sure. No way in, no structure, no apparent purpose. For the last hundred and fifty years it had stood, a white stone mystery glittering in the sun making everything around it insignificant. The Entropists claimed that the Masters were a metaphor for life, random and terrible. Useless nonsense, Alysha would have said. Life was for living and you made the best you could of it. We thought we were better out in the colonies, that we didn't have Entropists, not the real ones, the crazies who liked to blow things up. Then Loki had decided to show us we were wrong, and blown up Alysha's train.

Blind, deaf and dumb to the terror to come. I wished I could still hold her hand.

Other skyscrapers grew around me as the lift went down. Arrays of spikes and rods on their tops pointed across the water of the straits towards the Masters' monolith. Feng shui to reflect

malicious spirits back to their source, a legacy of Gibraltar's sale to the Chinese to pay off the British national debt. The Chinese had given the rock to Fleet a couple of decades later, and their workers and their superstitions too. At the base of the spire a tunnel buggy took me into the warren they'd built, repackaged as cheap accommodation for the support and maintenance crews who made Fleet's Earth headquarters work. I walked the last few hundred yards through the strip-light tunnels, picking my way over cable bundles and between the roaming neon-lit vending stalls that meandered perpetually down there like vagrant drunks, mewling their offerings of cheap kale burgers and lottery tickets. The air was damp and stale and smelled of diesel fumes, the ventilation system on the blink again. Liss thought I was mad living down here, but the cramped tunnels reminded me of home. I liked their gaudy squalor, and I liked the contrast between their underground ghettos and the haughty vertigos of glass and chrome above. Most of all, though, it was cheap.

The armoured plastic sheet that passed for my front door opened as I approached. Liss was waiting inside, her shell standing in the gloom. As I came close she stepped into the light and hugged me. The strip lights outside were harsh and unkind and showed her for the artificial construct she was. In the light her skin wasn't right, her face not expressive enough, the eyes just a little dead, but I'd learned to look past all that. It was her soul I'd been trying to preserve.

I held her and shuddered. There were more perfect shells to be bought if you had the money. The best – the most lifelike – were the sex toys, but I couldn't do that, not to Alysha, and so Liss was a designer hostess model, built for high-end restaurants and private caterers. Made no sense on Earth, where there were already too many people and not enough work, but they got made anyway. She was warm and soft and she was Liss. That was all that mattered.

'I'm better in the shadows,' she said. 'I know that.'

I pulled away. Our place was a mess. I hadn't started to pack, but then, come to think of it, I hadn't really unpacked when we came here.

Liss poured me a drink, some seaweed-derived spirit, and leaned against the wall beside me. Servos and batteries, metal and artificial skin, but the cracksman who'd crafted her personality had captured her mannerisms perfectly, the way she moved, the way she pressed into me.

'Tell me,' she said. 'Tell me what happened. Make up a story. I used to like that.'

'Used to.' I downed the shot of seaweed, hit by a sucker punch of the old grief, and hurled the glass at the wall. It bounced. 'I don't want to go back! Five years on another planet. You'd think that would be enough, you really would! Why isn't it?'

She leaned her head against my shoulder. 'Because you never let yourself move on, Keys. You're stuck in the same place you were in when you came here.'

Her, that's what she meant. Making *her*. Building Liss from the ashes of Alysha's memory. Couldn't argue, but we'd long ago drained the lake of that conversation and I didn't want to talk about it, not any more. I looked around instead, taking stock. Takeaway boxes lay piled up waiting for me to call a recycling drone. Empty bottles. Old dried bits of food on a piezoelectric easy-clean carpet. A sofa with cigarette burns on the arms that I'd never bothered to replace because I knew I'd never use it. A bed for those now-and-then nights when I wasn't away at some conference or on some mission. Damp patches on the walls because the underground ventilation was always playing up. The stains and discarded debris of a disposable life. I'd been in Gibraltar for seven months. Looking around it was like I'd barely arrived.

We'd had a house on Magenta. A home, the two of us

together, Alysha and me, a neat and tidy nest. We'd cared for it as we'd cared for each other. The only things cared for here were the array of screens, their q-ware hosters and the coffin for Liss's shell.

'You must hate me for this,' I said.

'I don't hate you for anything.'

'Then *I* must hate me.' Which was probably closer to the truth.

'It's your last night on Earth, Keys. Leave me behind. Go and have some fun with Agent de Korte. She likes you.'

'It's a bit late for new friends, don't you think?' It had taken two years for the cracksman to make Liss, to get all the data for a complete persona shipped from Magenta, in bits and pieces and mostly done in secret. Two years and an absurd amount of money, a debt I was still paying off. But she was as near to perfect as could be made, and you don't get that calibre of cracksman anywhere except on Earth.

You don't get the ethics either. Shells and Servants run simulated personalities all the time, but not of real people. We don't do that on the colonies. Major trouble. Prison time.

Boxing everything up was easy. The tech had its own packaging. Everything else came down to throwing untidy bundles into a polycarbonate crate followed by a long-overdue summons to Gibraltar's recycling and maintenance drones. Other days we might have made a game of it, thrown things at each other, laughed, forgotten for a moment that she was just a shell of someone dead, but not today. Took about half an hour, and that was that: I was good to go. Goodbye, Earth.

'I'm going to miss this place for its gravity.' I tried to laugh, to make it sound like a joke, but I didn't fool either of us. I wasn't going to miss the violence, the dirt, the poverty, the crowds, the inequality. But on Earth they knew how to build something grand. They knew about scale and awe, and most of all they

knew how much it mattered to have a way to escape. Magenta didn't have any of that.

Maybe I'd drive past that home we used to have …

I'd have to see Alysha's family. My own. The people we used to work with …

I sank to the bed and held my head in my hands, looking for a way out that wasn't there. Liss sat beside me. She touched my arm.

'I'll miss the bitsphere,' she said, 'How deeply everything is connected. I'm glad gravity isn't something I need to worry about any more.'

'Five years is a long time,' I said. 'They'll put me under for transgravity treatment for weeks. I'll have to shut you down again. Fleet have the best q-ware. I don't trust them not to snoop.'

'I know.'

'I don't know how to do this, Liss.' I was shaking.

'You're going to take me home, Keys. We're going to start a new life.' She dimmed the lights. As I curled on the bed she ran a finger across my hair. 'You don't look after yourself,' she said. 'I wish you would. You need to face that I'm gone. You need to live your own life. A new one without me. It would be better for you. We both know that.' She climbed into her coffin.

'I know.' I thought of my Alysha lying beside me, holding my hand, warm and alive in flesh and blood again. Knowing Liss was right wasn't making it any easier. 'Just keep breathing, right? Going to have to do this whether I want it or not.'

'That's the one, Keys. Here if you need me.' The same thing we'd once said to one another every night as we drifted to sleep.

Twelve hours later we were on our way to orbit.