

The background of the cover is a perspective view of a futuristic, brightly lit blue corridor. The floor is a grid of glowing blue lines that recede into the distance. The walls and ceiling are also lined with blue lights, creating a sense of depth and motion. In the foreground, a pair of dark-colored sneakers with a textured sole is positioned as if someone is looking down at them. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of blue, from deep navy to bright cyan.

FRIENDS  
IN DEED

T. M. HUTTER

*Champagne Books Presents*

# Friends in Deed

By

T.M. Hunter



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*Other Books By T. M. Hunter*

Heroes Die Young

# ***Dedication***

To my wife and all those who have always been true  
friends indeed.

# ***One***

Even in the depth of my nightmares, Lycus IV was a formidable hell. The scenery misled one to think of mighty grandeur. Lush green trees lined the banks of a wide, slow-moving river. It flowed in front of me over a deep bed of rocks while sporadic cloud cover offered broken views of a pale blue mountain range.

This prison planet's terror was not found in its natural surroundings, but from its unwilling inhabitants.

My filthy clothing, ripped and shredded, exposed bloody skin. I gazed back across the clear, inviting water.

A bellow filled the air and I turned. A pale, naked giant rumbled through the brush, still yelling at the top of his lungs. High above his head, he gripped his makeshift mallet, a boulder strapped into the fork of a tree branch. I jumped aside as the weapon crashed down.

He stared with one wide eye and the other glazed over. Saliva dribbled from his lips.

"I am King of the wooded realm! You dare invade my territory?"

This wasn't a fight I planned to stick around for. Psychotics were the worst type of violent.

He hoisted his club and swung it at me. I stumbled back and it came so close I felt the breeze. I turned toward the opposite bank and sprinted across the riverbed.

"Your punishment is death! Vengeance is demanded!"

I high-stepped through calf-deep water while the beast screamed bloody murder. I dared not look back, because there was no doubt he gained on me with every step.

My foot caught in a cluster of rocks under the surface and I splashed down, drenched by the cool, clear water. I flipped over and faced my attacker as he left me in a cold, dark shadow. Milky-white foam oozed over his lower lip.

"Prepare to meet your maker!"

He raised the mallet high above his head. At least death would be quick, but I couldn't say much for painless. I closed my eyes and waited for the crushing blow.

A whistle filled the air and the giant beast gasped and choked. My eyes flashed open as the beast dropped his weapon into the river behind him.

Only one object stood between me and oblivion, a homemade arrow buried in his neck. He couldn't pull it from the front, so he reached back. His mind gave up hope as soon as his fingers probed the stone tip. The monster's eyes rolled up out of the way, then his body fell backward.

The corpse splashed down and huge waves rolled past me. I scrambled around and gazed at the opposite bank. There, a bow in his left hand and more arrows strapped to his back, stood the man who'd just saved my life.

Elijah Cassus.

~ \* ~

I shot awake, drenched in sweat. We were dropping below the hyperspeed threshold and there was something wrong. My ship's computer usually gave me advance notice.

I wiped my forehead and kicked my legs over the side of my cot. "Jeanie, where are we?"

Her seductive voice was little comfort to me. "The Bacauri system."

An involuntary shudder passed throughout my body. I knew we'd pass this way when we first set a course for the Tranon system. Quite possibly, it was the reason my nightmare took the path it had. Trouble was, we weren't scheduled to make a stop. I jumped to my feet and scrambled for the front.

"A power fluctuation interrupted the hyperspeed engines."

This had never happened to me before. All I could think was how my life seemed destined to be a textbook example of bad timing.

"Once they cool down, continue course."

I slumped into my captain's chair and gazed at the forward viewscreen. A lone red planet, uninhabited, rested several megapars off in the distance, surrounded by tiny specks of light.

I looked over at the sensor screen and confirmed I wasn't just a victim of overactive paranoia. Sure enough, the Lycus system's border was only two megapars off my port side.

I shivered. "Jeanie, how much longer?"

"Should only be a few more moments."

I took a deep, calming breath. The prison planet, Lycus IV, had driven fear into my heart. My escape definitely hadn't made me any friends with the territorial rulers, the Gohr. It had almost led to my death, more times than I wanted to remember.

Without warning, the viewscreen filled with bright white light. I held my hand up to shield my eyes.

"Incoming transmission, unidentified vessel."

Ships didn't make unscheduled stops in the middle of nowhere, especially when there wasn't a communication beacon anywhere nearby. It could only mean one thing:

Someone was after me.

I readied myself. "Put it through."

A sub-window popped up in the left half of my viewscreen. A squat translucent bulb stabilized itself with a giant mass of short tentacles under its torso. Black eyes bulged against his green skin.

Wasirians were a nasty species, known for their short tempers and violent tendencies. I don't know of anyone who'd actually ever met a female, though. It made one wonder if that was the main reason the males were always so frustrated with the universe.

The beast's tiny beak jabbered, "Give me back my cargo!"

"What cargo?"

"Are you Aston West?"

"Yes, but what..."

One of his tentacles broke from the pack and pointed

at the screen. "Then give me back my Nomarian ale."

I scowled. "I'm telling you, I don't know..."

His forked tongue flapped out and he hissed, loud and shrill, to silence me.

"You stole my cargo!"

His giant bulb of a head doubled in size and deepened to a medium red.

I rushed to keep myself from getting interrupted again. "I didn't steal anything. What proof do you have?"

"An eyewitness saw you do it."

"Then your eyewitness is a liar."

His eyes narrowed. "Give it back or else!"

I muted the audio and spoke to Jeanie, my ship's computer. "What's his armament?"

"Proton cannons and a set of four AIR-3's."

Adilphi Interceptor Rockets. I could evade one, maybe two at the most. Four would be a stretch.

In the other half of my viewscreen, I watched his ship drift off in front of me, pointed in roughly the same direction I was. No more than half a kilpar long, the bullet-shaped front transitioned to a rectangular cabin, accented at the rear with four exhaust nozzles. Delta wings cradled his aft cabin.

His head grew a darker shade of red as I returned to the conversation. "Listen, I'm sorry you lost a shipment of Nomarian ale, but I don't have it. Scan my hold for yourself."

I didn't even know what Nomarian ale looked like, but knew all my holds were empty.

His tongue flapped a few more times. "Everyone knows scans can be deceived!"

True enough, but I didn't have his ale. I wished I did. Business had been dry lately, no pun intended.

"Maybe we can retrace your steps and figure this out."

I had no idea why the idea of using diplomacy even entered my head. It wouldn't have been any use with a Wasirian, even if I'd been good at it in the first place.

"You will not return my ale?" His eyes widened. "Then you will die!"

My life is never dull.

The sub-window disappeared from the viewscreen, which left me an expansive view of the starscape outside.

A skin panel rose along the top of his ship, just forward of the nozzles. His thrusters flashed and the vessel turned toward me. He was about to do something very stupid.

Jeanie confirmed it. "His rocket launchers are deployed and targeting is on-line."

"Idiot." I grabbed the control stick to my left and rested my other hand on the thruster control panel.

My ship banked and propelled itself in response as I jerked the stick forward and to the left. I had to keep him from getting a targeting lock. I kept his ship centered in my viewscreen.

"Can you hack into his computer and disable his targeting computer?"

"Negative. I have attempted to do so since he dropped out of hyperspace. He has a very impressive security system in place."

"Guess we'll have to do this the hard way. Bring up the proton cannons, continuous burst."

"Done."

"Disable his targeting computer. Maximum power." The sooner I disabled him, the better.

"Maximum power," she repeated.

I leveled my ship out.

"Fire."

Green beams pulsed from either side of the viewscreen and impaled his launcher.

"Whoa! Cease fire!"

Jeanie obeyed immediately, and the beams dissipated to nothing.

"I wanted to disable his targeting computer, not destroy his warheads."

"His targeting computer is located inside his launch bay. It has been disabled as you requested."

At least no further damage had been done.

Or so I thought, as all four warheads glowed bright red moments before they blew. Another explosion followed when the fireball ripped into the engine pods, and the ship was shredded to pieces. The fire extinguished itself in the vacuum of space, and scrap metal raced away from the scene of the crime. Small

fragments pelted my ship and I cringed. The last thing I needed was a hole in my hull. Emergency depressurization in the middle of nowhere wouldn't be fun.

"No life signs detected."

As if there had been any doubt.

I closed my eyes. I hadn't meant for the fool to die. Sure, he hadn't been the first person I'd ever killed, but there was usually a reason someone had to die. Stupidity wasn't one of them. Why hadn't he just believed me? Now he was dead, because of lost cargo neither one of us had possession of. The truly sad part was neither of us had the ale.

"Wait for the debris field to clear. Then get us out of here."

"Acknowledged."

This brief interruption had given me a respite from my earlier fear. Without death staring me in the face, though, I returned to my thoughts of Lycus IV.

I closed my eyes. As long as I stayed on this side of the border, I had nothing to worry about. The Gohr were notoriously mean and vicious, a fact anyone who'd heard of them was well aware of. They only left their territory to annex others, though, and for nothing else.

I opened my eyes once again. The sound of debris against the hull had ceased, but yet we still sat in normal space. "Jeanie..."

"Forward coolant injectors are not responding." Without coolant, the hyperspeed engines would turn my ship into a ball of liquid metal.

Definitely not anything to experience firsthand.

"Wonderful!" I leaned back and stared at the beige overhead liner, then rubbed my temples. "Can anything else go wrong?"

"I'm picking up a Gohr destroyer departing orbit around the planet."

I double-checked the sensor screen. "What's it doing outside of Gohr territory?"

"I don't have an answer to that."

I turned to the viewscreen. The destroyer rapidly approached and triple-barrel turrets emerged in exquisite detail. Twin stacks took up residence just forward of a raised bridge. One shot, and there wouldn't even be debris left to

sift through for my remains.

If they discovered who I was, and they would, my escape from Lycus IV would mean my death. My stomach churned with the knowledge my weapons and hull would be useless against a warship. There was no way I'd outrun them, either, not without operational hyperspeed engines.

"They're closing in on weapons range," Jeanie announced. "Incoming transmission."

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