

# Keyhole

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*Tennin Books*<sup>scot</sup>

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**Title: Keyhole <sup>TM</sup>**

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Location: Wisconsin, USA

Publisher: Tennin Books

Publication Date: July, 2023

First printing: 2023

ISBN: 979-8-9886326-0-3 (pbk. book)

Subjects: Fiction, Science Fiction, Humorous

Book cover design by Aymen Klidi

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# 1

“You’re late with your payment, Nick.”

Nick stepped back from the colossal biped blocking his path. Barely a meter-and-a-half tall himself, he scarcely reached the waist of the being in front of him. Even if Nick had been the same size as the thug, he’d have been no match for him. Nick’s tidy potbelly, round like his head, bespoke too much beer and too little exercise, whereas the goon’s arm muscles threatened to burst the double-XL sleeves of his suit.

Dressed in a pink pinstripe suit and a fedora that clashed with his necrotic yellow skin, Urk's top debt collector, Durkin, was well-known to Nick. And, given Nick's recent bad luck at the casinos, the thug's visit was no surprise.

Another of Urk's enforcers blocked Nick's progress as he stumbled backward. Swallowing hard, Nick licked his lips before answering.

"Please, Durkin, I'll have Urk's credits by next week. Payday's only a couple of days off. You know I'm good for it. Just give me more time."

The thug leaned over, grabbed Nick by the neck, and squeezed. Hard. Water from the planet's perpetual mist ran down the sleeve of the mobster's suit, mixing with the tears running down Nick's face. His native world, Ghoul, was a desert planet, and his aversion to water amplified his sense of drowning as he struggled to breathe.

"That's what you said a week ago. You've gambled away even more since then, and Urk don't run a charity. He said to collect one way or the other. And since you don't have the credits," the thug smiled as he drew an ugly black cylinder from a pocket, "today, it's the other."

Nick staggered as the neural whip lashed his chest, then screamed as the thug brought it back across his face. The whip's electronic thongs left black stripes across his red skin. One curled around the short, sensitive horns on his forehead, lifting him to his toes in agony. Whimpering, he fell to his knees. A rush of relief flooded his loins as Durkin swung the whip back for another blow, only to catch his partner Dweeble in the head instead.

"Ow! Ow, ow, ow! Watch what you're doing, you farking moron!" Holding his scorched forehead, Dweeble gave Durkin a hearty shove.

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“Watch it yourself, Dweeble!” Durkin recovered his balance and grabbed his partner by the lapels.

Seeing his chance, Nick crawled away, then sprung to his feet and ran. As he turned a corner, he heard the smack of fists on flesh.

Nick kept going as he splashed down narrow alleys between run-down buildings of brown brick. Etched by eons of the planet Downside’s nauseous climate, they loomed over him as he ran.

The mist soon turned into a frigid downpour, and he pulled up the hood of his jacket to ward it off. All that did was concentrate Downside’s pervasive smell of rotting vegetation. As he slogged through the fetid mud, Nick thought this was one of the vilest planets he’d ever visited, and he couldn’t wait till his ship reached for space.

Not that he needed more incentive to leave the place.

His next paycheck wouldn’t cover what he owed to Urk, and everybody knew what happened to people who failed to pay their debts. It was hard to think that anything could be worse than a beating from a neural whip, but people disappeared without explanation, and the local organ banks never seemed short of material.

Nick hesitated at a street corner. Left would take him to the short-lease apartment he was using while his ship, the *Vagabond*, was in port for overhaul; right would take him to the spaceport. His shift didn’t start until evening, but it would be an excellent place to hide from Urk’s debt collectors for a bit. Security was tight, and even though his crew space was tiny, there was no way for Durkin or any other thugs to get to him. He could swing by his apartment later to get the set of grav tools he used to operate the ship’s wormhole and the few other belongings he kept there.

Without conscious thought, Nick reached into his pocket for his lucky dice. Running them through his fingers helped him calm down while considering his options. Making up his mind, he turned right. A block later, he was on a main boulevard where he could catch a slidewalk to his destination.

When he reached the spaceport's gate, he tapped his thumb against the ID scanner. It compared his thumbprint with the personal ID chip embedded under his fingernail, verifying his identity. Then, after checking his access permissions with the AI that ran the port, it opened the gate. Nick scampered in, looking back to see if he had been followed. Though his spaceship was secure, the port itself was not. There was no knowing if Durkin or one of Urk's other goons had bribed their way in and might already be lurking there.

A few minutes later, he was at the Vagabond, where one of the ship's security guards was stationed at the crew hatch. Nick had heard that the captain was nervous about a prolonged stay in the refuse heap that passed for Downside's spaceport.

But when Nick tried to board, the guard stopped him and said, "I've been waiting for you. Got orders to take you right to the first mate."

"Why?"

The guard sneered and took him by the arm. "You'll find out soon enough."

He shoved Nick into the first mate's office a minute later. The first mate, a potato-shaped creature with multiple tentacles and myriad eyes, sat behind a polished aluminum desk. Glancing around, Nick felt his heartbeat speed up when he saw the chief engineer sitting in the corner of the room.

The chief engineer disliked ghoulies, a sentiment shared by most galactics, and had made Nick's employment miserable, blaming him for everything that went wrong. The satisfied look on the chief's space-pocked ochre face looked sinister.

"What's up?" Nick asked, trying to stay calm.

The first mate waved one of his tentacles, dismissing a holo display he had been scanning. Then, leaning forward, he fixed three of his five eyes on Nick and said, "I have a report indicating serious misconduct on your part."

"What, uh, would that be?" Nick fidgeted under the officer's withering glare and kept glancing at the chief, who remained silent.

"A surprise inventory has revealed that some expensive supplies are missing. Four cases of bivalve oil. At a thousand credits apiece, that's quite a sum. Of course, you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"No! Of course not!"

"Yet, the video logs show that you are the only person who accessed the supplies locker when the items went missing."

"But I'm innocent. How can that be? I didn't—"

"Please, don't bother denying the facts. The chief engineer himself provided the logs to me. And your gambling problem is well-known. According to the chief, you're heavily in debt, and it's obvious you stole the supplies to pay it off."

Nick turned to stare at the chief, realizing he'd been set up.

Leaning back in his chair, the first mate continued, "Under the circumstances, I have no choice but to terminate your employment immediately and with prejudice. The cost of the missing supplies has been deducted from your final paycheck. And since the result is a negative number, no credits will be issued."

“But...but don't I get a hearing?”

“Yes. This was it.” The first mate gestured to the waiting guard. “Throw this thief off the ship. And don't be gentle.”

Before Nick could protest, the guard put him in a painful arm lock and frog-marched him out of the room. Another guard joined them in the hallway, grabbing Nick by the neck and his other arm.

When they reached the exit, the first guard smacked Nick in the head, making his eyes water as the world spun. The other guard kned him in the hip, then together, they rushed Nick down the gangway and face-planted him in the mud.

For several moments, all Nick could do was lie in the soup and sob.

His dream of becoming rich and respected seemed farther away than ever. Not only was he deep in debt to a notoriously blood-thirsty loan shark, but now he'd lost his job. And was stuck on Downside. The prospect of being stranded on a planet whose chief export was pessimism left Nick deeply depressed.

Gathering himself, Nick got to his feet, pausing for a moment until the world stopped spinning. Then, rubbing his left shoulder, he limped away from the spaceport. Stunned at his savage turn of bad luck, Nick tried to think of where to go where he might be safe. Nothing came to mind. Hopping on the slidewalk, he headed into town, vaguely intending to return to his apartment.

# 2

As he rode the slidewalk from the planet's lone spaceport into the surrounding slums, Nick's shoulders slumped, and he wiped the rain from his eyes. He sneezed as Downside's predominant fragrance attacked his sinuses. Wet, cold, and broke, he was running out of options. The daily downpour just emphasized an outlook that made the expression 'down on your luck' sound encouraging.

The credit chip under his fingernail still had a meager amount of funds left, which he thought he could make last another day or two if careful. But the solace of a cold draft of Glurb ale was seductively appealing, and he needed something

to pick up his spirits. So when Nick saw the Blue Sky Bar & Grill's flashing sign, he left the sidewalk and slipped into his favorite dive.

He smiled at the sweet smell of sizzling glorpburger that the bar's owners piped in from a vent over the door, then wrinkled his nose as the planet's default aroma overwhelmed it. The bar had the damp, musty reek characteristic of every building on Downside.

Nick lingered under the doorway's auto-dryer for a bit longer than usual. There was no way he could afford a private de-dampening pod, and this would surely be the last free thing the Blue Sky would offer him.

A dozen tables to Nick's left were populated by aliens from many worlds in various states of intoxication. It was hard to tell if a couple of pallid worm-like beings from Catpil VII had fallen down drunk or were just making their ponderous way to the refresher booth.

The heavy thump of a hypnotic techno-beat punctuated by the crystal dissonance of Kintaran chimes blared from an overhead music streamer. Half a dozen folk wobbled and twitched to the beat on a dance floor to the right while a small group of grasshopper-like jikli cracked out on Koke twirled on the iridescent ceiling.

The Blue Sky's horseshoe-shaped bar of polished oogerwood bulged into the center of the room like an onramp to paradise. Nick headed straight for it, then paused when he saw who was sitting there. It was Egrog, an amorphous being from the planet Gob. Currently in the form of a sphere, the gobbet was bright turquoise, indicating it was in a relaxed, happy mood.

Before Nick could turn around, the gobbet extruded a dozen tentacles with eyeballs, all focused on him.

“Nicky! Just the guy I was looking for!”

“Uh, hi, Egrog. What brings you to these parts?”

Nick’s hesitation came from recent, painful experience. The gobbet was a grifter to the core of his narcissistic soul and could no more resist the opportunity to swindle another being than a child could set aside a favorite candy.

In contrast, Nick had the pragmatic attitude common to other ghoulies that, coupled with an ineradicable naivety, a tendency toward situational ethics, and a weakness for games of chance, left him easy prey for Egrog’s get-rich-quick schemes.

“Nicky, I was hoping we could have a drink and chat about a little project I’ve got going.”

“Ah, well, now’s not the best time—”

“Nonsense! Any time is a good time to have a drink with my favorite ghoulie.”

“I’m the only ghoulie you know, Egrog, so that’s not quite a compliment.”

“Hey, you’re not still mad about that little mix-up on Frangaline II?”

Nick sighed, then took a seat next to the roughly spherical creature. “I guess not.”

“Of course not! It’s not like I meant to leave you there. And the locals let you off with just a warning, right? No blood, no foul, as they say on Earth?”

“Not familiar with the saying.” Nick’s unease grew as he looked at his occasional partner. “You haven’t been hanging out with some earthlings, have you? You’re the last person I’d expect to get religion.”

Egrog laughed. Earth had two exports of interest to galactic civilization, one of which was the soft-drink Koke, which proved to be a highly addictive and pleasant stimulant for many species. The other was missionaries. Most worlds barely had the enthusiasm to produce one religion. Humans brought dozens with them when they ventured into space. Dismayed at the lack of spiritual engagement of galactic civilization, humanity responded with a vigorous stream of missionaries determined to bring salvation to every sentient being in the universe.

In Nick's experience, Earth's missionaries were generally welcomed by the various races of the galaxy. The more advanced civilizations viewed them with amusement, much as one might indulge a well-meaning but somewhat dim pet who insisted on bringing you your slippers in the morning even if you were already shod. On the other hand, civilizations still reaching for space took full advantage of the missionaries' technical and monetary resources in exchange for just a few minutes a week of prayer. And, of course, there were a few less-evolved species who treated the arrival of a shipload of missionaries like the local food truck and sincerely appreciated the free meal.

"No, Nicky, I'm not the religious type."

Nick took a moment to scan the holo-menu floating over the bar. The lingering smell of roast glorb burger was irresistible, and he ordered one with a basket of wiffle-fries. The finger-sized fries were deep-fried and tended to be salty. So he added a mug of his favorite drink, Glurb ale, a beer enhanced with the more potent purple glurb.

"So, how come you're suddenly spouting Earth talk?"

Before answering, Egrog extruded a slender tentacle, formed it into a straw, and then took a sip from a schooner of straight purple glurb.

He sighed. “Nicky, you’d be surprised what you might learn hanging around with some humans. They send ships out to every quadrant of the galaxy, and some of those who come back have stories that would curl your antennae.”

“I like my antennae just the way they are,” Nick said, shifting uneasily on his stool. Ghoulies had long, feathery antennae that they kept hidden in the short horns that projected from their forehead. Their antennae were sensitive organs, and he considered it rude to mention them unless you were a close friend or family member. At the moment, Nick didn’t think Egrog qualified on either account.

“Of course you do, didn’t mean to offend!”

Egrog extended a tentacle and patted Nick on the back. “So, how come you’re hanging at the Blue Sky at this time of day? I thought you had the evening shift on the Vagabond. Are you just stopping in for a cold one before work, or did the boss give you shore leave for bad behavior?”

Egrog chuckled at his own joke, then stopped when Nick scowled at him.

“Egrog, I just lost my job, and I’m deep in debt to Urk. Durkin and one of his buddies beat me up this morning and said I’d get worse if I missed another payment. And we both know what that means.” Nick looked around nervously before continuing. “But the Vagabond’s first mate won’t give me my last paycheck because of disciplinary termination. Not a good time for any of your jokes.”

“Hey, sorry, I didn’t realize that. What happened at work? Why’d they let you go?”

“When I showed up for my shift, the chief engineer accused me of stealing some bivalve lube.”

“Did you?”

“No. But the company’s accountants ran a surprise inventory check when we docked two weeks ago, and they must have found some missing.”

“Do you know who did it? Maybe turn him in and get your job back?”

“Ha! I’m sure it was the chief engineer himself, but I’ve got no proof. Besides, they looked up my record on rGov and noted what happened on Frangaline II. Bastoviches didn’t even give me two weeks’ severance.”

“Ouch!”

“Yeah. I tried to complain, but the security guards grabbed me and just tossed me out the hatch like I was day-old flurb meat. They wouldn’t have treated me like that if I was a kintaran or flufflpertan, but ghoulies just don’t get any respect. It’s discrimination, I tell you!”

“Chill, dude! Don’t get your antennae in a twad!”

“That’s easy for you to say, Egrog. You can take any form you want. And by the way, keep your pseudopod out of the fries! You’ve already eaten half the basket, and I’m short on credit.”

“No problem, Nicky!” Egrog withdrew his offending body part, snatching a fistful of fries as he did. “And a smart guy like you shouldn’t have to worry about money. Which is what I wanted to talk with you about. If you’re interested, it could mean the score of a lifetime. You’d never have to worry about credits again.”

“Egrog, I didn’t make a single credit on the last caper you pulled me into and nearly ended up in a recivilization center. If I could get a real job on another starship, I could pay Urk back enough to keep from another beating. Or worse. But in this economy? Do you know how many ships’ crews got laid off when the market for purple glurb tanked due to short supplies?”

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Who knew the interstellar economy would be impacted by something like that? And it's not like my training as a wormhole engineer translates to a job on the ground. rGov won't even let us run simulations inside a planet's gravity well, let alone crack open a portal to another world."

Egrog shifted his bulk, oozing into a somewhat upright pillar on his bar stool, before replying, "Well, what did you expect? After that idiot on Reamus II opened a wormhole to a gas giant that sucked in half a continent before they could close it, people have been a little touchy about that sort of thing. Only the big commercial starliners and government starships are trusted to operate portable wormhole generators. It takes longer for the rest of us to travel to a local wormgate, but it's safer than unregulated wormholes."

"Yeah, I get that. The worst part is ghoulies aren't very popular anyway, and when ladies find out what I do for a living, they find somebody else to talk to. Know how long it's been since I had a date?"

"Sorry to hear that, Nicky. You'd never have trouble picking up chicks if you were a gobbet like me." Egrog briefly formed a tentacle into something large and obscene, then hastily reabsorbed it as a tall, green mantid approached.

"I saw that," she said, scootching up to the bar next to Egrog. "My name's Alice. I've heard stories about you gobbets. Didn't know they were true."

Egrog went from his usual shade of turquoise to a squalid magenta, something Nick recognized as indicating a state of internal distress. He hid a smile at his friend's predicament. The gobbet's piratical sex life had just hit a shoal. The females from Mantis were known across the galaxy for their ferocious creativity when mating, which often left a male crippled and occasionally missing his head. What one might do with a being

that could take any shape was one of those questions best pondered over a punch bowl spiked with purple glurb at fraternity mixers among the less prestigious universities.

Mantids were also notoriously warlike, forming the backbone of rGov's heavy infantry, and Nick edged back a bit at the sight of three diagonal lavender stripes on Alice's green thorax, indicating that she was a platoon leader. Several icons below them showed that though young, she had already fought in multiple campaigns.

And though her face was covered with inflexible chitin, she had large, expressive eyes with long curly lashes, and Nick could see that she was looking for adventure, hopefully in all the wrong places. Egrog withdrew all of his appendages, leaving just a single eyestalk poking out of his body, which had shifted to a dingy yellow.

"Well, you shouldn't believe everything you hear. We're not that different from other folks, and we've got feelings. Not everybody appreciates how sensitive we are."

"Of course, sweetie. If it gets you in the mood, I'll light up a candle while you light me up with your, er, special abilities."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not interested, Alice."

"Ooh, I love how you trill the 'I' when you say my name. It's so sexy!"

"Seriously, I'm not—"

"Oh, of course you are. I've seen you in here before and watched you pick up fawning, swag-bellied drabs like the ones at that table over there. You're no monk."

"Look, uh..."

"Alice. My name's Alice."

"Yes, well Alice, I'm just not sure we're really compatible, you know?"

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Alice sidled closer, cuddling up to Egrog, then slowly ran her hand down his back. Or what passed for a back on a gobbet, lightly touching his skin with the razor-sharp tips of her nails. “Oh, we’re compatible. And I can do things for you those other girls can’t.”

She leaned close and whispered something Nick couldn’t make out, running her hand down Egrog’s body again. The gobbet turned magenta where she touched him, leaving a vivid streak that contrasted nicely with the dull yellow of the rest of his body.

“Looks like you’ve got your hands, that is, pseudopods full, buddy.” Nick tapped the credit chip located under his fingernail on the counter to pay for his meal. “I’m outta here. You lovebirds have fun.”

Alice slid even closer to Egrog as he wailed, “Wait! Nicky, don’t leave me like this!”

Nick paused, one eyebrow lifted in sardonic amusement.

“Nicky, I got a deal for you. Can get you out of your current jam if you’re interested.”

Nick hesitated. “Whatcha got in mind?”

Egrog protruded a half dozen tentacles with eyes and scanned the room, overlooking Alice’s sudden focus on their conversation. “Can’t talk here. But it’s a real score, could set us both up for life.”

“Why me?”

“As I was just saying, you have certain talents that are currently, ahem, going wasted. I can put them to good use.”

Nick scowled, “No thanks, bud. I barely stayed out of jail after your last scheme fell through. Not interested in another one.”

“I’d be interested in anything you might have in mind,” Alice purred, stroking the gobbet again.

“But, Nicky,” Egrog protested, “I need your help on this one. Really. Truly.”

“Enough! Talk to you later.”

As Nick left the bar, he chuckled at the sight of his friend trying to extricate himself from the mantid’s attentions.