

# THE FORGOTTEN SKY by R.M. Schultz

## EXCERPT

### Seeva

Seeva didn't expect fresh powder in this frozen tundra, but the brittleness is also odd.

Her slender legs aid her in stepping out of the icy sinkholes she creates. Now she wishes her feet were larger, much larger—like snowshoes—so she could scamper across the surface.

Seeva squeezes her pulser gun's grip within a gloved hand and flexes her fingers. Her glove freezes to the metal and tears as she studies a spotty trail of blood that has thickened over the last kilometer.

*This planet ... again, but now its remotest region.*

Shadows loom ahead. Two silhouettes: trees, crystal trees. They appear as bony hands with gangly, naked fingers, tearing their way from beneath the ice.

Ori—Seeva's only companion, a flying creature resembling a monkey but covered in black and white feathers—howls, his tone armoring his sorrow. His flapping wings are as silent as his breathing, as silent as the calm of night.

Crunch. The snow sounds like breaking bones beneath her boots.

Seeva hunts the hunter, rushes to protect the defenseless inhabitants of this planet against humans, or humanoids, and their destructive nature.

Ice crystals drift up into the light, the snow dust of the tundra turning softly and twinkling: luminous, midnight blue, violet, carmine, shimmering like miniscule fairies who can only shout in color, the colors of the winter night.

Thirteen moons seem to suspend the sky over Seeva's head. Glowing spheres or sickles form a vault of pale light; silver and azure shades paint the snow. Floating ice particles create a nimbus around the moons, some of which are as large as suns while others appear like crescent blades that could be carried on her back, waxing blue and waning copper. Another's lighted surface is pocked by meteoroid strikes.

All Seeva recognizes in this shape is a skull with a depression fracture.

Biting cold.

Another strained step, and Seeva's foot punches through crusty snow. Air almost as thick as ice burns as it claws its way into her throat and then explodes in her lungs like smoke inside a burning building. Even the heated inhalation mask and the coils in her snowsuit barely keep the subzero temperatures out of her lean body.

A cloud of breath plumes from her mask into the night, turning to hoarfrost in the air before being sheared away by a rising wind.

*Who the \*\*\*\* could have done this? Tracked their victims through this region?*

A gust of salty wind batters Seeva's masked cheeks, the smell of blood hanging thick. She sees it: a splatter of black liquid against the restless white haze of hills and jutting mounds.

Her stomach solidifies into a dense ball of tension. Sparse hairs on her arms stick up; her scalp tingles.

Red light falls in a soft curtain, coating the landscape, washing out the moonlight. Seeva glances skyward.

Something is out there, something massive, beyond the moons. It pulses with a red glow like the heart of a god.

Seeva knows anarchy reigns out near the drifters, at the extremity of the galaxy, where unusual planets and peculiar people dwell. Where habitable worlds are sparse and civilizations sparser. Where many become lost. Where beyond the drifters lies the dead zone, an emptiness between galaxies that is always dark. Where no suns and no planets roam, where no one ventures.

A lock of Seeva's sable hair lashes out from its typical location, clipped around the oak-dark skin of her neck like a scarf. The strand appears like black water, only hungrier, obscuring her vision as the wind skirls around her. She tucks it behind the orange-tinted view of dynamic lenses, projections from her v-rim—a thin silver band stretching from the ends of each eyebrow, a central dip at the bridge of her nose—a viewer for all the information she needs plus a link to the galaxy's central network.

Seeva marches on, her feet sinking through brittle snow, her breath spewing into brittle air.

She wonders what kind of person could do what she's worried she will find: the victims, the source of the blood trail. What backward fools with hearts of molten coal treated others like crops?

Seeva recalls a trial and lawsuit her Silvergarde Alliance discovered occurring on the neighboring planets, one hushed up from public scrutiny. The Northrite council, the primary governing agency of the galaxy and the largest corporation, was attempting to obtain mining rights to these planets.

She also recently heard of a newly discovered planet blanketed by a liquid sea—instead of clouds—the water suspended in its atmosphere by the gravity of its thousand moons and tensile

troposphere. Only in the past year had people discovered land below, and then found native humans already living there, living in medieval conditions on a continent isolated from the rest of the galaxy.

Consciously aware humanoids have been venturing out from their planets of origin, dispersing throughout the galaxy and between solar systems, since the first age. Before Elemiscists discovered Striding, traveling so many light years could take families generations to reach another planet in their own galaxy, even traveling at the speed of light ... *generations* ... unless the occupants were placed in cryosleep. Slowly, over tens of thousands of years, the mixing of peoples and humanoids is now commonplace. And humans, as if by divine design or grievous error, have spread throughout the galaxy like the most adept colonizing virus.

Seeva is too similar to them all for her liking, even with her short stature of one of the ancient races, one dating back before the time of the communicating galaxy, before the time of even the written word. The small women of old, the ancient, dark-skinned sirens. But she's not special: no magic, no enigma, no fading into fog.

The pulsing red light radiating from the heavens grows brighter, pulling Seeva back to reality.

"What the \*\*\*\* causing this and what does it mean?" She points the muzzle of her pulser gun skyward.

"Time to leave," Ori seems to say with only his pink and emerald eyes as his head rotates fully around his body. He's wary of hidden spirits in this desolate place, wary of memories, of emotions. Ori's native planet. She knew he'd be affected coming back here.

Seeva recalls a recent dream: a sound like wind shuffling leaves, a shadowy figure concealing something in their palm, something red and beating. Coincidence?

She strides forward.

*Hunter, I know your path. I feel your presence. This trick with the light will not stop me.*

Ori's wings beat against the wind without a whisper.

A tower of a mountain soars upward in the distance, dark against the flashing red and pewter sky. A range of sharpened cliffs—which appear as black flames frozen in their fury—run before her, jagged peaks of petrified fire roasting the belly of the night.

Seeva follows the blood trail, climbing in lunges and bursts. Her feet crunch and slip on icy stairs of rock as minutes wear out and fall away, the flashing red overhead the fiery breath of a monster kindling her anxiety.

Beyond the crest of a white mound, a ravine of snow emerges. Massive forms lie scattered about, limbs stiff and stretching toward the moons.

The victims.

As Seeva approaches, a shape becomes more distinct. An enormous animal. Purple hide as tough as leather wrought with iron. Stocky body and legs. Clubbed feet. Spike-like horns should have protruded in dense rows across its body, but only blunted stumps remain. Black liquid has pooled around the carcass, staining the snow with a macabre, amorphous shape resembling a distorted man.

*The innocent and the weakest are always the first victims, in times long past and in the present. Only the perpetrator—this butcher—and their master and how to find the two of them changes. But this ... this pointless slaughter.*

Something inside her lashes out in anger, through the cold in her heart, with tongues of flame.