

# SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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# A TIME FOR REVENGE

by CALVIN M. KNOX

*illustrated by EMSH*

The Vordillans were alien beings, human but alien. They thought in different categories, and a Terran had to respect this vital difference in their life

FENTON didn't have much to go by when he landed on Vordil IX, but he thought it would be enough to find the alien who had killed his brother. The Vordillans, like any aliens, looked pretty much alike to a Terran—angle-bodied lemon-colored leathery men with dark black fur collars sprouting round their throats—but Fenton had a few stray scraps of description, of differentiation, to cling to.

The Terran liner angled down out of the skies and left Fenton at the spaceport, half a mile out of the main settlement. Immediately three bright-yellow Vordillans came scuttling toward him, and

asked with their clicking accents if they could carry his baggage into town.

Almost automatically he looked them over, looking for the pale grey forehead-stripe and the reddening of the collar that marked the one who had killed Jamie. But these were ordinary Vordillans. He picked the least ugly and handed over his bags; the other two melted into the crowd.

The baggage-boy hailed a two-passenger cab that took them to town. "Staying long?" he asked Fenton.

"As long as I need to." Broodingly, Fenton stared out at the alien scene, at the blue-black carpet of grass and the



needle-thin trees on both sides of the road. "I'm on vacation. Spending a couple of months touring the galaxy."

"You will enjoy Vordil IX, sir."

*Jamie took his vacation here,* Fenton thought. *And one of these little clowns killed him.*

As they rode into town, Fenton tried to remember the last time he had seen his younger brother. Jamie had been big, topping Fenton's six-two by at least two inches, and there had been something warm and smiling about him that the older brother had never had.

And now Jamie was dead. But a friend of Jamie's had sent word to Fenton, who had been living on Aquillon VII, and Fenton was here to even the score for Jamie.

The cab rumbled into a hot little town of square little buildings strung out in endless rows. "Do you have a hotel reservation, sir?" the baggage-boy asked.

Fenton told him the name of the hotel; the boy repeated it to the driver in Vordillan, clicking it out. The cab veered sharply to the left. They jounced down a rutted road

and stopped before a building somewhat more imposing than the rest. Its gray sides seemed to be made of slabs of mud. Hanging over the entrance was a gaudy sign:

## GRAND VORDIL HOTEL

— Terrans Welcomed —

The baggage-boy flipped open the side of the cab—the whole thing lifted away, like the top of a trapdoor spider's home—and dragged Fenton's baggage out into the street. Fenton handed the driver an octagonal Vordillan coin, received three tiny slivers of metal in change, and followed the baggage-boy into the hotel.

A chubby Terran stood just within, wearing seersuckers and sweating heavily. He grinned as Fenton entered.

"You Fenton?"

"That's right. McGill?"

The fat man nodded. "Glad to see you got here. I was wondering whether you'd bother to come."

"He was my brother," Fenton said quietly.

A Vordillan came bustling up to him, jingling keys. "I am the proprietor," he said. "You

are Mr. Fenton? Come—I shall show you your room.”

Fenton glanced at McGill. “Why don’t you come along with us? I’d like to talk to you.”

**T**HE room was small and very square; a filter-stat kept the dusty Vordillan air circulating, but otherwise there was no real air conditioning. *A hell of a planet*, Fenton thought. *A hell of a place for a man to die.*

McGill was sitting on the edge of the bed, sweating. Fenton said, “You were the last to see my brother alive, weren’t you?”

“That’s so. Jamie stayed at this hotel; we were very friendly.” Perspiration oozed down McGill’s flabby cheeks. “I saw him just before he was—killed. The alien came and got him in the hotel bar. They left together. Only the alien came back.”

“What happened to the body.”

“The aliens buried it in the forest. The Terran Consul made some inquiries and found that out. Got a drink, Fenton? I’m parched.”

Fenton buzzed the lobby and had them send up a bowl of Vordillan wine and two glasses. He doled the greasy stuff out to McGill, poured himself a drink, and said, “You’re sure about the one who killed Jamie?”

“Positive. Grey stripe across his forehead, and that black ruff of his was on the red side. There’s no doubt about it. He admitted it himself.”

“What? Isn’t there any legal system on this planet?”

“Yes,” McGill said smoothly. “Your brother was a victim of it.”

Fenton let it sink in. “What the hell does that mean?” he asked the fat man finally.

McGill finished his drink before replying. “Your brother did something that made his life forfeit among the Vordillans. He was...executed. Local law doesn’t recognize it as a murder.”

“And the life of an Earthman—”

“—is worthless,” McGill said. “Don’t believe what you read in the travel guides. Your Terran citizenship isn’t worth a damn, once you run out of dollars.”

"Did Jamie?"

"Jamie was doing a lot of drinking, toward the end." A retrospective smile lit McGill's face. "He was a generous boy, was Jamie. He didn't have much money left."

Suddenly Fenton felt disgusted by McGill's presence; the fat man was interplanetary flotsam, a drifter who had come to the end of his drift here on this hot, dusty little planet, who had seen a good touch in Jamie and so had befriended him. Fenton stood up and said, "I'll have to start unpacking now. Would you excuse me?"

"Of course. I'll be in the bar any time you want me."

Fenton nodded. "All right. And if that alien with the red collar shows up, give me a buzz."

FENTON took a long time unpacking. When he was finished, he drew his needlegun from its holster, broke it open, and inspected the charges. Sixteen of them, and the heat hadn't done them any harm. He reholstered the weapon and went down the three flights of stairs to the hotel lobby.

It wasn't hard to find the bar. The odor of stale liquor floated out from behind the stairs; he followed it. McGill was sitting at the bar, back to the door, head hunched down over a glass. A dark blotch of sweat stained the back of his shirt.

An alien sat at either side of him. Fenton walked noiselessly across the floor and nudged the fat man.

"McGill?"

"Huh—oh, you. Fenton. 'Scuse me." McGill muttered something in the harsh fricatives of the Vordillan tongue and the alien at his left moved over one seat. Fenton slid in next to McGill.

McGill was drinking something red and thick-looking from a pottery dish shaped like a gravyboat. He poured a little into a glass and offered it to Fenton. "Try some. Native drink; pretty damned good. They call it *ghar*."

Fenton sipped it. It was bitter, with a delayed-action kick that really kicked. Fenton imagined this could leave a man mindless in a month, if he drank enough of it.

He said, "You know why I'm here on Vordil?"

"Can't possibly guess," McGill remarked blandly.

"I'm here to avenge my brother," said Fenton. "I want to find the alien who killed him, and kill *him*. Blood-feud. Vendetta."

McGill turned to stare full-face at him. "You better have another drink, Fenton. The heat's getting you. Go on—have another one. It's cheap."

"No," Fenton whispered harshly. "I'm serious. The law on Vordil's going to overlook his murder...but I'm not. I owe Jamie at least that much. If I have to comb this whole planet to do it, I'll find his killer. My own brother, buried somewhere in a forest on a little dustball in the back of a galaxy...dammit, McGill it's no *good!*"

The fat man shrugged and took another drink. Fenton looked around at the silently smiling Vordillans, the slim almost-humanoids with the sharp angular bones protruding from their bare shoulders and the fur collars sprouting from their throats like expensive wraps. In the half-darkness of the bar,

they all looked alike: grotesque not-men cut from a single mold.

Fenton took ten crisp ten-dollar notes from his wallet and fanned them out before McGill. "You can buy a lot of drinks with these, McGill."

"Yes. Hell of a lot. So?"

Fenton rifled the plastic bills and said, "The hundred is yours if you find Jamie's killer for me. You know this planet; you even know the one I'm looking for. Find him and the cash is yours."

"Pay in advance," McGill grunted. "I'll guarantee delivery."

Fenton hesitated for a moment, then put the bills down next to McGill's drink. With a swift motion of his pudgy hand, McGill scooped them up and pocketed them. "Thanks," he said thickly. "You got yourself a deal."

"I want Jamie's killer," Fenton said. "How long do I have to wait?"

"Not a hell of a long time. He's sitting right over there in the fourth booth back."

**T**HAT stunned Fenton enough to freeze him at the bar for a long moment. H

turned, at last, and counted booths. A single alien sat in the fourth booth, bent over a bowl of liquor. It was hard to see details at this distance and in the dingy light, but it seemed to Fenton that there was indeed a grey discoloration on the alien's forehead, and that the alien's furry ruff had a distinct reddish tinge.

Fenton gripped McGill's fleshy forearm tight. "You aren't playing games with me, McGill? That's the one?"

"His name is Cklezn" McGill said pronouncing the alien name with an ease born of long practice. "He's the one who did Jamie in. I'm not cheating you, Fenton."

"You better not be. I have plenty more bolts in my needle-gun than I'll need for Cklezn."

McGill paled. "I'm an *Earthman*, Fenton. You wouldn't—"

"Jamie was an Earthman oo," Fenton reminded him. "That didn't stop anyone from losing him out." He swung himself lightly out of the seat, picked up his glass, and said, "I'm going over to have a talk with that alien. You stay right here, understand?"

"I got a hundred dollars to drink up. It'll take a while, even for me."

Fenton crossed the bar, stepping around two weavily drunken Vordillans, and headed for the booth where the single alien sat. Cklezn was peering into his drink, not seeming to care what was going on about him. Fenton was tempted to draw his needlegun and put three or four bolts through the alien's body without bothering to talk to him, but he choked the idea down.

That was the wrong way. Besides, he'd never get away with it in here.

The needlegun was cold against his skin as he bent over the alien's table.

"Is your name Cklezn?" he asked, hoping he had the consonants pronounced right.

The alien peered blankly at him and nodded.

"Mind if I sit down?" Fenton asked.

The alien shrugged. Fenton took a seat in the booth facing him. "My name is Mark Fenton. Maybe you knew my brother. *Jamie* Fenton."

Slowly, the alien's mouth



opened. "Oh. I knew him. Yes."

The bald flat way the alien had of saying it hit Fenton savagely. His eyes narrowed. "You—*knew* him, eh? He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"How did he die?" Fenton asked, weighting each word, making it come out almost as four separate paragraphs. "You know how he died?"

"He was killed," the alien said.

"They tell me he was killed by a Vordillan. Is this so?"

"It is so."

"By *which* Vordillan?" Fenton's fingers trembled.

"I killed him," Cklezn admitted. "You knew this before you sat down next to me. Why do you ask all these questions, Mark Fenton?"

**F**ENTON resisted an impulse to lean across the table and throttle the alien, to grab that reddish fur collar and shake and shake. He said, "He was my brother. Do you know what a brother is?"

"You shared parents, yes? I know."

"There's a loyalty between

brothers. Christ knows I never stuck too close to Jamie, and that's probably why he went drifting around until he landed up on Vordil. But he died here. Why'd you kill him?"

"I had to," Cklezn said simply. "I had no choice."

Fenton remembered what McGill had told him: "*He was . . . executed.*" "Why? What did my brother do to you that made you kill him?"

"Naming it would be as bad as doing it, said the alien. "I cannot tell you."

Casually, Fenton slipped his hand inside his blouse, tugged at the butt of the needlegun, worked it free from the holster. He drew the gun up out of his armpit far enough for the butt to show. The metal had an ugly glint in the dim light of the bar. Cklezn glanced at the deliberately exposed gunbutt, then looked away.

"You know why I'm here on Vordil?" Fenton asked.

"Your brother is dead. You wish to avenge him."

"You're smart, for an alien. You've hit it dead center." Fenton hadn't expected it to be this way; he hadn't expected to be holding a long question-

and-answer session with his brother's killer. The quick shot in a quiet street, the moment of revenge—that was what he had anticipated. Not this.

"I'm going to kill you for killing my brother," he said. "If this place weren't so damned crowded—"

The alien gasped. "No! Not here! It is—impossible—"

Fenton frowned. "I wouldn't do it here." He became suddenly conscious that eyes were on him—*alien* eyes. He looked around. Half a dozen Vordillans were staring at him, regarding him intently, curiously. He knew he could kill Cklezn before a n y o n e moved—but he'd have them all down on him a second later.

The alien lifted his drink-bowl to his face. He had six bony fingers, Fenton noticed, each tipped with a long, tapering green fingernail. The alien drank, set down the bowl, and said, "There is a time for revenge, Mark Fenton. It has not yet come."

He rose smoothly, dropped a coin on the table, and before Featon could move had vanished suddenly. Fenton sprang to his feet, intending to follow.

Instantly a living wall formed before him: the Vordillans who had been watching him so intently had swiftly glided from their seats and now barred his way. Fenton clenched his fists. The alien was escaping.

A moist, fleshy hand clasped his shoulder from behind. "Don't make a fuss," said a husky voice. McGill's voice. "Don't start trouble in here. It'll be bad for all of us, you know."

Fenton whirled. "He just walked out of here, and they're blocking my way."

"Naturally. They know why you're here. Everybody does. They want you to do the thing properly. They don't want you to shoot him down in a bar, like a pig."

McGill was bobbling unsteadily, but his voice was the voice of a sober man. He seemed to know what he was talking about. His hand tightened on Fenton's shoulder, and he forced him back down into the booth with surprising strength. It was as if beneath the blubber there lay muscles of beryllium steel.

Imperceptibly tension slack-

ened in the bar. The aliens returned to their places. Fenton thought impatiently of the killers escaping outside.

"He won't go far," McGill said, as if reading his mind. "He'll only head out to the forest. You have time to find him whenever you want him. Relax, and have a drink. Let me buy you one. It's your money, anyway."

WITH a few more of the alien drinks in him, Fenton felt relaxed enough to sit still and stare at McGill's puffy face without getting the urge to set off after the escaping alien.

"You've been here a while," Fenton said.

"Six years."

"Okay. Fill me in on a few things. I get the feeling I'm involved in some sort of ritual, and I don't understand the ground rules."

McGill sighed wheezingly. "You've got to understand that these are an alien people, and they don't think the way you do. Maybe there are some surface resemblances, but that's all. Hell, they have two arms

and two legs, so they *almost* look like Terrans. But they aren't. And they almost think the way we do, except they don't really. You follow?"

"I think so. Why did they kill my brother?"

McGill shrugged. "That's part of it. I don't know why they killed him; he was a nice enough kid. Somewhere along the line he did something that they didn't like. Maybe he didn't even know he was doing it. But they picked Cklezn to kill him, and Cklezn took him out to the Death-Grounds in the forest and killed him."

"Didn't he try to fight back?"

McGill looked abashed and apologetic. He said, "Jamie was too drunk to know what they were doing to him."

Fenton's eyes dropped. "I see." After a moment he said, "You couldn't find out what he did?"

"It's taboo to name it. I don't know."

"And what about this Death-Grounds business?"

"It's a place in the forest," McGill said. "When a man has to die violently, he tries to die

there. That's where Cklezn went. If you had killed him in here, he would have lost his soul, or something. He's out there, waiting for you to come kill him. I tell you they're funny people, Fenton. They're alien."

"Let me get this straight," Fenton said, pushing back some hair from his forehead. "Jamie did something wrong. Cklezn killed him. And now Cklezn is out at the Death-Grounds waiting for me?"

"He did something wrong, too," said McGill. "He killed a man. It's a chain that goes on and on, dragging in victim and executioner. I don't know where it ends."

"But that's not right!" Fenton protested. "You can't send a man out as an executioner, and then expect him to die too! Not even aliens—"

"Cklezn killed Jamie while Jamie was drunk. That was the wrong thing for Cklezn to do. So Cklezn's life is forfeit, and if you go out to the Death-Grounds you'll be able to claim it. They're aliens, I tell you. We can't ever really understand them."

Fenton took a long drink. He

licked his lips smackingly, exhaled, stood up. "How do I get to the Death-Grounds?" he asked.

HE left after lunch, when the white dwarf sun was high overhead, blazing furiously. A crowd of interested aliens gathered about the hotel as he left, gun strapped outside his shirt, head shielded by a protective toupee.

McGill walked with him, reeling just a little. Fenton felt completely sober. He didn't bother to look at the curious Vordillans who peered at him; he walked right through them, out into the dusty, sandy road.

"I'll go as far as the entrance to the forest," McGill said. "I'll put you on the road. You can't miss the place if you go straight."

"How will I know when I've reached it?"

"You will. It's a circle about a thousand feet in diameter, smack in the middle of the forest. Not a tree, not a blade of grass—totally bare. Death-Grounds. Cklezn will be there waiting, anyway."

"Armed?"

"No. He expects you to kill him. Make it a clean death, Fenton. Then come back here and pack up your stuff and get off Vordil. Kill him quick and clean and the chain of death is broken."

"You're sure you don't want to come with me?"

"Damned sure," McGill said emphatically. "This is your quarrel, friend. You'll have to settle it alone."

They walked together through the town, down a twisting little rutted road that wound off in a direction leading away from the spaceport. After a while McGill said, "Okay. This is as far as I'm going. You walk straight and you'll get there okay." He pulled out a soiled bandanna and mopped his head. Vordil was the hottest world Fenton had ever seen: hot and dry, but not so that it couldn't make a fat man sweat.

Fenton took five tens from his wallet and waved them in front of McGill's nose. "You come with me and you can have these bills for your very own," he said.

Hesitantly McGill shook his

head. "It's your quarrel," he repeated stolidly. "I got enough drink-money to last me a while. I'm not going any further."

Shrugging, Fenton handed him the bills. "Keep them anyway, then. Thanks for your help. I'll see you tonight, I guess."

"Yeah. See you later," McGill said.

He turned away and waddled back the way he came. Fenton began to walk...on, toward the Death-Grounds.

The alienness of the place was borne in on him as he walked. The afternoon was silent, except for the droning of silvery insects four or five inches long that swooped through the slender trees that rose like needles along the road. The grass sprang up thickly—suarish, shovel-shaped blades, a dull, ugly blue-black in color. In the distance rose a low hill, thick with the spike-like trees.

Life ran fairly close on planets that were fairly similar. The people of Vordil IX were *almost* human; the trees were *almost* trees, the grass *almost* grass. But not quite. There were differences, sometimes

glaring, sometimes subtle. The birds didn't sing, here; they barked. Rabbits bounded out of the thick-packed shrubbery—but they were rabbits with snake-like tails and beady blue eyes and savage teeth.

Fenton wondered how it had been for Jamie to walk this path—whether he had been sober enough to see where he was and how alien the things were, or whether it really mattered to him. He pictured big Jamie being dragged along, half-supported by the wiry little Vordillan who was to be his executioner.

He stared ahead, eyes flicking nervously through the trees. Despite all that McGill had told him, he found it hard to believe that Cklezn would be simply waiting for death, and he expected some sort of ambush. He moved forward warily, now, hand ready to spring to the needlegun in the holster.

But no danger presented itself. The alien calm of the afternoon remained unbroken. The road twisted and turned, winding like an epileptic serpent, and Fenton followed every twist and every turn, never

knowing when death might step out from behind a curve.

And then he turned one final curve and knew he had reached the Death-Grounds.

Whether man-made or natural, there was no way of telling. But the area was absolutely sterile. Not a blade of grass, not a tree-trunk. It was a circle of utterly bare ground, perhaps a thousand feet in diameter, naked, nothing but black earth.

Cklezn stood waiting in the very center of the circle, his thin arms folded in a startlingly human pose.

**F**ENTON drew his gun and advanced into the circle cautiously. The butt of the needler fit nicely into his palm; his anxious finger lay tensely on the firing-stud. Cklezn stared at him interestedly, without moving.

"This is the Death-Grounds, isn't it?" Fenton asked. His voice was strangely dry.

"Yes. I have waited for you, Mark Fenton. This is the place for revenge, and this is the time." He sounded calm, resigned. He didn't seem to carry any weapons.

"The time for revenge," Fenton said, lifting the needle-gun. Somehow it was strangely hollow, gunning down a willing victim this way. It wasn't the sort of death that would wash away the burden of Jamie's murder.

"Why did you kill my brother?" Fenton demanded suddenly. "What did he do?"

"I must not say it," Cklezn muttered. "Especially not here! Not on the holy ground itself!"

Fenton gestured with the gun. "I want to know what my brother did that made it necessary to kill him." He smiled craftily. "You'd better tell me, Cklezn. Or else I'll drag you halfway back to town before I kill you. You wouldn't like that."

The alien sucked in his thin lips in a nervous gesture. "No. I must die here—on this ground."

"Then tell me."

"Very well," Cklezn said wearily. "It is wrong, and I will be punished for it...but not half so heavily as if I do not die on the Death-Grounds. Come." He started to walk toward the edge of the forest.

"Where are you going?"

"I can't commit a sin while standing on the Death-Grounds itself," Cklezn said.

Fenton followed him across the bare ground to the forest. The border of the Death-Grounds was precise and even, as if it were weeded every day. Probably it was. Cklezn stepped over onto the grass.

He said, "Your brother spat at a priest during a ceremony. This is unforgivable. He was drunk, and knew not what he did—but he had to die for it." The alien shuddered and looked away.

Fenton wondered what taboo made it so revolting for Cklezn to utter Jamie's crime aloud. "For that you killed him?" he asked. "For a drunken act that he never knew he committed...you killed a man?"

Cklezn nodded.

A sudden terrible rage flooded through Fenton. That Jamie should die for such a cheap thing, he led to the fields of slaughter while he was drunk and...

His finger tightened convulsively on the firing stud. He knew how he could exact a fit-

ting revenge, now. He squeezed the stud, once.

A bolt lanced through the fleshy part of the alien's leg. Cklezn gasped and sank to the ground. A needlegun was not a painless weapon.

He stared at his leg, with the tiny hole drilled through flesh and bone and muscle and nerve. "I killed your brother quickly," he said. "Do the same for me."

"Don't worry," Fenton said. "I'm not going to torture you. The next shot is to kill."

Cklezn looked relieved. He began to crawl forward on his hands, over the grass to the nakedness of the Death-Grounds. Fenton grinned.

"Sorry. I don't want you to die there."

"But—"

He seized the stricken-looking alien and dragged him back, tugging him remorselessly over the ground away from the Death-Grounds. Cklezn clung to the grass, dug his hands into the soil, tried to hold back, but Fenton pulled him on.

Finally they were a hundred yards from the Death-Grounds.

Cklezn rose uncertainly and tried to stagger back, exclaiming constantly both in his own language and Fenton's. Taking careful aim, Fenton sent a bolt through his other leg.

The alien toppled, face-forward. Fenton heard him sobbing.

"*This* is the time for revenge," Fenton said. "Out here. You'll die the way my brother did...alone, unpriested, in the wrong place. That's the proper revenge."

Cklezn wailed once. Fenton nudged the firing-stud and the needlegun leaped in his hand. The bolt whizzed through Cklezn's throat. The alien jerked, nearly rolled over, then flattened out.

*A time for revenge*, Fenton thought.

Then sudden hands appeared to wrench the needlegun from his astonished grasp.

HE whirled and saw four aliens looking at him sadly. One held the needle-gun, pointed directly at him. They had come up so noiselessly he had not suspected it.

Fenton went cold despite the



afternoon heat. "This was between me and him. I killed him. He had it coming to him, didn't he? Give me back my gun!"

The alien with the gun smiled unhappily. "We came to see that it was done right. We had hoped the chain would be ended here. It was not."

"What in blazes do you mean?"

"Your brother...did something. This man punished him for it. The method he used brought punishment upon *his* head, and you were the instrument of that punishment. You, too, failed by wilfully destroying Cklezn's soul." The alien indicated the crumpled body on the grass, and pointed to the Death-Grounds. "He should have died *there*. Your vengeance was too great, Fenton."

"You don't understand. I—"

He broke off and ran forward, hoping to seize the gun. A shaft of pain seared through his thigh. He fell, doubling up, trying to squeeze the bright

agony out of his leg. After a moment he looked up and saw the aliens regarding him patiently, sadly.

Fenton thought of Jamie, drunk, uncomprehending as Cklezn drove home the fatal blow. He thought of Cklezn writhing on the ground a hundred yards from the place where he had come to die. Fenton shivered uncontrollably.

"The chain of death ends with you," the alien said. He nodded to the other three, who lifted the crippled Fenton and bore him forward.

He felt warm soil beneath him—warm, bare soil. Sprawled on the ground, he dug his hands in hard, and waited to die. The aliens had been kind. They had carried him to the Death-Grounds. The one holding the needlegun fired; and Fenton felt absurdly grateful to them as he writhed on the bare ground, waiting for death.

THE END