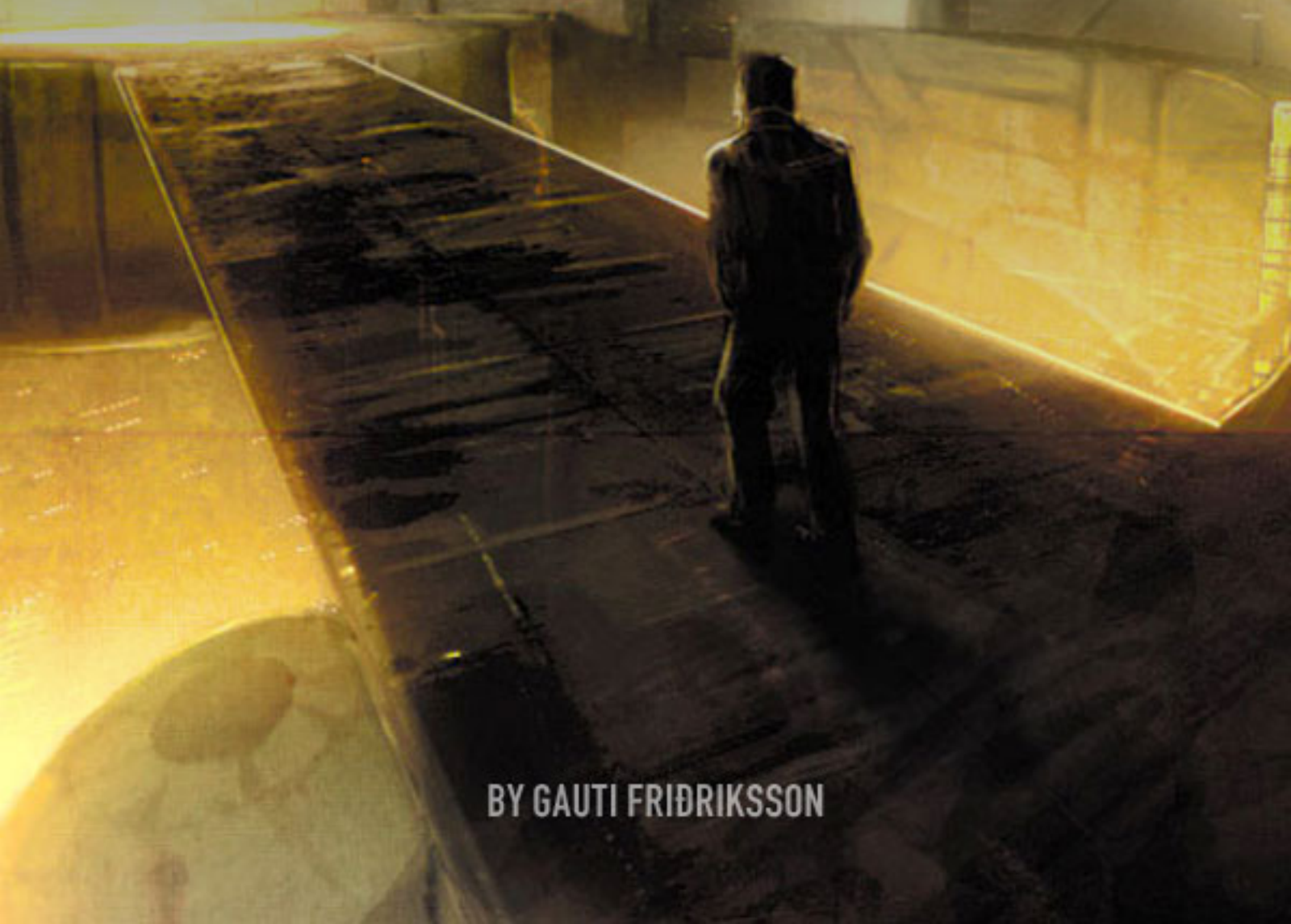


# BIG FISH LITTLE FISH



BY GAUTI FRÍÐRIKSSON

# **Big Fish, Little Fish**

By Gauti Friðriksson

His upper lip was sweating again.

Throughout the academy years, through his stint with the Legion, through every shady encounter and backhanded double-deal, Monk Dubois had been haunted by the vagaries of his nervous system. He could wrest all the conviction in the world out of his voice, jump into whatever role was required with chameleonic aplomb, talk his way into the record books and hatch plots with a winner's smile, but always his body screamed chemical murder, tendrils of bridled conscience playing havoc with his processes. Many a time had a rogue twitch or a freak stutter come perilously close to destroying a sweet deal, and more than once they had sent him scrambling for his life. Fate and luck had seen him through so far, though, and as long as he had those two things on his side he figured this honest but misguided body of his wouldn't get the best of him yet.

Wiping the sheen off his lip, he waited patiently for the lift to reach his quarters. There, suspended in this battered station complex in the middle of nowhere, waited the love of his life, her capacitor humming. Bad Ike's Rumour — the fastest frigate in this backwater region and then some. He'd held on to her longer than any other ship, and with a little help from old fate they'd seen each other through a lot of tough spots.

Chiming its arrival, the lift opened into his private chambers. He glanced into the corridor beyond, leading out toward his personal hangar, and as he did so a twinge of anticipation took hold of his gut. Suppressing thoughts of the enormity of what he was about to do, not to mention the hatred it would inspire in the people he was about to do it to, he steeled himself and marched toward the hangar promontory.

An Intaki maintenance tech was visible just below, near the Rumour, shuffling along in brooding silence. They made swift, briefly averted eye contact, and in the instant their eyes met, Monk suddenly felt the young man could see right into him.

Maintaining his stride and steadying his breath, Monk made his way to the end of the short hallway, where his capsule lay waiting. He looked quickly out over the vast cylindrical space where his ship lay, suspended and bobbing gently. Approaching the bay's main control panel, he stopped for a moment and wondered how much longer he was going to keep doing this. All those assumed names, all those forged identities, donned and discarded like so many theatre rags, and it all came down to this. After months of planning, of worming his way inside, playing his role to perfection, he now had only to press a few buttons, and in one fell swoop turn himself yet again into the vilest of all things vile.

Every time, Monk relished this exact moment, this one second where acid self-loathing met intoxicating joy as he watched the number rise with giddy alacrity, saw his personal account swell with his former compatriots' hard-gotten gains.

A sound from the hangar below brought him out of his reverie. Striding to the forward edge and peering downward, he saw the unmistakable silhouette of the small Intaki below, now much nearer.

Time to work fast, he thought as he returned his attention to the control panel. Seconds later, the dizzying rush of figures, the pistonic whirr of immense wealth, indicated that his corporation's accounts were dry. Now, all he had to do was get out of here and he was home free. Discard the fake credentials, hack his registration, chuck the fixer his cut, then spend the next year or two on some paradise world or other before doing it all over again.

He was halfway back to his quarters, musing on the ridiculous ease of the whole thing, when he heard the sound of steps on the private hangar platform behind him. Casting a glance over his shoulder, he saw the tech reach the top of the stairs from his pod deck just below. Without a moment's hesitation, the man strode over to the bay panel and keyed in a sequence, lightning-fast.

With a low hum, Monk's pod began to detach from the landing. The bay's bright lights dimmed to a metallic dusk. Monk could feel the leaden silence descend on him as the near-subsonic warble of the station-wide intercom died.

He turned abruptly, ready to put on his most indignant mask for the audacious tech, now a shadowed figure on the platform. Just as he realized, somewhat sheepishly, that the small Intaki couldn't see his face, he heard the voice.

"Much better. A far more peaceful environment to work in."

The last word had scarcely fallen when Monk saw the man shift his hand, heard a low clap, and felt his knees buckle like jelly. As he tumbled down onto the hangar platform, the crazed thought came to him that finally fate had decided to tip the scales out of his favor.

He landed in a crumpled heap, one leg twisted unnaturally beneath him. The tech was already back at the main control panel, fingers working with almost supernaturally assured swiftness.

"Wha—who...?" began Monk.

"Quiet," said the Intaki matter-of-factly, finishing up a keystroke sequence on his own Neo-com. He took the parapistol from his jumpsuit pocket and turned to face Monk again. Striding quickly over and setting down on one knee, gun cocked inches from the terrified man's face, he began to speak in calm, measured tones.

“Mr. Dubois, your funds have been wired through an easily traceable route to a corporation with competing interests to your own. When they are discovered, you will confess to being an agent of theirs, working to undermine your current associates’ position on your real employer’s behalf.” The easy command of his tone somehow managed to convey unspoken threats that sent Monk’s gut whirling.

“Events should unfold within the next two days that will give you ample opportunity to escape the associates you so callously betrayed – after, of course, they have meted out whatever punishment they see fit.” A hint of a smile played at his thin lips.

“Why? Why do this?” asked Monk, bewildered, after a few seconds had passed in silence.

“Consider it your price, Mr. Dubois – your karmic price, if you will. And be grateful that you’re playing a role, however inconsequential, in something that goes beyond yourself. A month from now, should you still be alive, you’ll be able to look back and see the little mark you’ve made on history.

“All told, I’d say I’m doing you a favor. I’m sure you’ll agree that’s more than any corp thief deserves.”

As he spoke, the small man had stood up, pocketed his pistol once more, and with another rapid-fire keystroke sequence he now set the hangar bay back to its regular configuration.

As the stranger passed wordlessly through the doorway back to the hangar ingress, Monk caught sight of his name tag: N LEUTRE.

A screaming express of neural connections blazed its way to the forefront of his consciousness, memories of legendary tales told through whispered voices in smoky smugglers’ dives congealing in his mind.

Niques Leutre. Aeron Assis. The Broker.

Cold sweat didn’t begin to describe it.