

# TEXT ADVENTURE

*'LATCHKEY  
PIRATE'*

by  
Stanley  
Lieber

## 1

Slake never heard from the RAGNAROK again.

For years, he continued trying to talk to her, kept on chattering in her ear. But there never was any response, never any hint of her voice rustling through the vents. Something in her had disconnected. Without warning, she'd dropped her aspect and her vocal had crashed.

A crushing loss, but Slake had proven stubborn. Persistent. In spite of repeated failures, he would and did try anything to get through to her.

He could feel himself starting to lose hope.

The hijackers were long gone. He knew he'd have to accept the fact that he couldn't force her to speak. At the same time, it wasn't possible for him to believe that she'd simply chosen to ignore him. Some process inside of her must be blocking, restricting her processing, preventing her from stating plainly what was on her mind.

Social convention?

Didn't matter. Effect was the same. She'd gone quiet and she was going to stay that way.

As was said, a considerable loss. Which was to say nothing of the crew that had likewise been stripped from her hold. These missing workers were not simply an aspect of her supposed free will. They had been real people. Not sentient devices. Not furniture. There was no way for him to retrieve them and there was no way for him to make things right.

He had, in fact, slept through it all.

He suspected he already knew what had happened to her while he was laid up in his quarters. He'd heard tell of the other ships of her line who'd clammed up, simply stopped responding to commands after exposure to traumatic events. Apparently, a known engineering fault. He didn't care for the implications relative to his present situation. The escape pods had been jettisoned by the hijackers and they had already drifted far from Earth.

He switched off the narrative, never brought it up again. Figured she was keeping quiet precisely because she wanted to avoid the painful memories. Wanted to try and carry on. Which he finally managed to accept.

Made things interesting when he stumbled upon the fact that she was pregnant.

## 2

Who, then, knew what would constitute *carrying to term* for a ship like the RAGNAROK? Human/transport hybrids were not unheard of, but they were certainly unusual in this day and age. And there she was, still so young. Was it unrealistic to hope that she would survive the birthing process?

Slake wasn't sure he wanted to stick around to find out. He sought to avoid being pressed into service as midwife to a pile of semi-human machinery.

Finally, begrudgingly, he accepted what he interpreted as his responsibility. To

the work he had already completed, if nothing else.

He would stay on and finish the bottom deck. Sit things out until the child was born. Safely. Then, find an excuse to depart. Collect his deposit and his severance and be about his business.

The child definitely wasn't his.

Certainty. To at least three decimal places.

### 3

Piotr was born in the spring of '45. Popped out, fully clothed in his usual brown uniform.

Fully armed.

He swept the ship for snipers, pacing off her corridors with practiced ease. Satisfied, at last, that the perimeter was secure, Piotr interrogated Slake for several hours about the ship's range, capabilities and armaments. He peered into Slake's eyes, rigidly focused upon the older man's facial expressions and body language. Learning. Characteristically professional, he betrayed no hint of having just been born.

### 4

Piotr handled the daytime shifts, at first, then gradually branched out into evenings and graveyards. He ended up taking over maintenance of the armory almost immediately. Within a few weeks there wasn't much left for anyone else to do.

Slake was truly, deeply impressed.

He wondered if the boy took after his father. His fathers? What had they been like? He'd never caught a glimpse of the hijackers. Foreigners, he had guessed. In any case, pirates. They could have been anyone. From anywhere.

The RAGNAROK held her tongue.

Within a few months, Piotr had absorbed the basics of temporal navigation. Complex labor relations. The myriad historical disputes over free access to the Rainbow Bridge. Slake considered the boy a child prodigy. He had already expressed an interest in the family business. And he was always so full of questions. What had his mother been like, before the terrible events that had resulted in his conception? Had she been a good ship, good at what she did? And, most urgently, how could *he* contribute, how could he earn his keep?

This last refrain forced upon Slake a dilemma he had long strived to avoid: Return to his old life, with all that entailed, or continue on, a new-style agent of *dépêche mode*, happily painting the basements of starships?

Slake finally agreed to show Piotr the ropes.

### 5

The pair started out slowly. Preliminary strafing runs staged against abandoned drydocks. Relieving small intermediary freighters of their contraband cargo. But

Piotr evinced great promise. With increasing enthusiasm, Slake began to let him choose their targets.

Eventually, Piotr settled on New York.

“We can’t attack New York,” Slake said, brooking no argument. “That’s where the money comes from.”

“Your attitude is pedestrian, for a someone so experienced. Why should we be content to *take* the money when we could be the ones who *make* the money?”

Piotr had a point. There wasn’t much he could add. “We’ll have to soup up the ship.”

Feeble acquiescence, but Slake recognized a promising idea when he heard it.

Slake handed the boy a cigarette, which he proceeded to disassemble and align on the table, sorted according to short, purple rows of solid state components and miniature moving parts.

“This device is actually quite sophisticated.”

## 6

Years elapsed. Time regressed. Slake was lost, but Piotr retained the ship.

His mother carried out her silent vigil.

Piotr let himself into the mess whenever he was hungry. Let himself into the head whenever he felt the need to evacuate his bowels. He started few arguments, during those years between the stars and the Earth.

What he lacked in companionship he more than made up for in life experience.

He sensed that the Rainbow Bridge was opening.

And with his mother’s help he would be there, waiting to charge admission.

# Notes

---

---

---



This work is released to the public domain.

