

# ROGUE TROOPER BLOOD RELATIVE

BY JAMES SWALLOW



Sole surviving member of his unit, Rogue Trooper is cut off from Souther lines and hunted remorselessly by the Nort forces. He's hot on the trail of the Traitor General who sold out Rogue and his buddies, three of whom accompany him as sentient life-chips stored in his high-tech weaponry. When his latest lead takes him back to the site of the Quartz Zone Massacre, Rogue gets more than he bargains for at the hands of a unit of brutal bio-warriors.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Swallow has previously written adventures for the heroes of 2000 AD in the *Judge Dredd Magazine*, the novels *Judge Dredd: Eclipse* and the audio dramas *Dreddline*, *Jihad* and *Grud is Dead*. He has also written a number of other novels, including the *Sundowners* series and *The Butterfly Effect*. He lives in London.

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*Sequence Begins: Reference PBI2743#987. Digi-Orchestra setting:  
"Southern Freedom March Suite". SynthVox selection: Female.  
Subliminals at interval grade alpha. Training vid commences.*

"Courage. Faith. Honour. These are the values that you, as a soldier of the Confederacy of the Southern Cross Republics, embody. Even now, as you watch this vid, thousands of your fellow troopers are fighting for those very same values on battlefields across the galactic frontier. Like you, they have bravely volunteered for a duty that no ordinary person could be capable of. Like them, you have proven that you have the stamina, the fitness and the keen mind that the Souther Army expects in all its men and women. Take a moment and look around you."

SynthVox pause, approximately four seconds.

"What do you see? Your fellow soldiers, brothers and sisters-in-arms preparing for their first day of military service to the people of the Confederacy. Together you are the very tip of the spear, honed to a fine, deadly point. Think of your family and friends; if they could see you now, they would be filled with pride at your accomplishments."

Open planetary data file. Image: Reference NUE97104/A#X45.

“Because of your level of excellence, your unit has been selected for operations at our most important conflict site: the planet Nu Earth.”

Galactic map graphic. Scroll and zoom in to star system 97104, planet A.

“Our war with the vicious rogue nations of Nordland is at a critical juncture here, and you alone may be the one to help turn the tide. Nu Earth is of crucial strategic value because of its proximity to the Valhalla Gate, a Type Epsilon Wormhole Crossroads which links it to other important star systems; ask your line officer for more information if you would like to learn about black hole hyperspace travel. To allow this world to fall into Nort hands would leave our peace-loving home colonies open to their savage and pitiless attacks.”

Subliminal optic trigger #34 (Anger/Hatred/Determination analogue).

“Your tour on Nu Earth will not be an easy one, and you will be tested. During your rotation, you will face extremes of warfare never dreamed of in other battle zones - ruthless Nort weapons such as the cursed Hellstreaks, Decapitator drone mines and the sinister psychogenic Dream-Weavers - but your trusted leaders at Milli-Com are deploying the finest counterforces to these evil devices, including advanced Robo-Gunners, the latest fighters and even genetically engineered super-soldiers. Alongside these allies, you will prevail. Have faith in your commanders. The Southern Nation has confidence in your superlative skills; your four weeks of training and orientation have moulded you into the best fighting force the South has to offer.”

Subliminal optic trigger #197 (Pride/Arrogance analogue).

“The transport ship you are currently aboard will begin its landing pattern in a few moments. Remember! The bombardments by the cowardly Norts have poisoned the atmosphere of planet Nu Earth through their destructive use of chem-weapons, bio-toxins and nuclear munitions! Under no circumstances are you to remove your chem-suit while outside a sealed environment! Stay alert, watch your teammates and keep your suit patches to hand!”

Digi-Orchestra volume to maximum. SynthVox tones to setting 4.

“Follow your training and you will be unbeaten! Discipline, teamwork, belief in the unit - these are the keys to victory.

Know your directives! Obey orders. Trust your commander. Destroy all enemies. Show no mercy. If in doubt, consult your war book. And remember - The Scheme's The Thing!"

Sequence ends.

Ivar rolled the kaff-stik around his mouth as he patted his pockets in search of a lighter tab. The bitter flavour of the artificial caffeine substitute had not been improved by spending a few days inside the pocket of his combat fatigues and the thin white tube was bent a little in the middle, but for Ivar it was a taste of heaven and it flattened the twitches that came from his near-addiction to the mild stimulant. He counted himself lucky that his posting to Nu Sealand freed him of the need to wear a full-hood chem-suit.

The Nort base hid itself in the midst of a rusting stilt-town out in the shallows of the Orange Sea, off the Dix-I coastline; once Nu Sealand had been the site of a geothermal power plant, built in the heyday of the colonisation years. Back then, when the Orange Sea had been called the Crystal Sea and the waters had actually been blue, the facility was hammered into the ocean floor with plans to tap into Nu Earth's magma core for cheap, clean energy. Had it worked, the plant would have lit up half the continent, but construction was never completed, as the wars took more and more money from the coffers of the Nordland Territories and gave less and less to civilian contracts like the rig. By the time the ocean had been turned to a dirty umber by rust-fungus bio-bombs, Nu Sealand had accreted a shantytown on its half-finished decks, packed with refugees fleeing the warfare.

Ivar found the tab and touched it to the kaff-stick; he was rewarded with a warm gust of vaporised caffeine molecules and sucked them into his lungs. He'd been in school then, during the early throes of the war, and the vidiganda shows had captivated him. Ivar joined the Nort army as soon as he was old enough, gleeful that he would be sent to Nu Earth to torch the arrogant Southers just as the proud men on the screen had done. Reality gave him a different view on things, though. He soiled his chem-suit on the first day he fought the enemy, and there, cowering in a foxhole on the outskirts of the Toron-2 citiplex, Ivar realised what a terrible mistake he had made.

His dumb luck saved him; a senior officer with the same surname was killed half a world away, and because of a related foul-up in assignments at High Command, Ivar found himself

sent back from the frontline and placed here, out in the ruddy waters where nothing really happened. At some point in the past decade, the Norts had flamed the rig to kill all the civvies clinging to its grimy framework and then quietly set up shop on board. It was a choice spot, just over the horizon from Souther-held Dix-I, a perfect listening post and staging point for Filth Columnist missions. When the push from Greater Nordland had come just a few weeks ago, Dix-I fell to the Nort war machine - thanks in part to the operations of the Nu Sealand crew.

Technically, the rig was a naval outpost, but the sensitive nature of what was done there mandated an army presence too - hence Ivar and the rest of the cadre garrisoned in the mid-levels. Ivar didn't really know the exact ins and outs of what happened in the core decks of the stilt-rig and he didn't really care. It was something to do with computers and communications, that he was sure of. Even the slowest soldier couldn't fail to notice the clusters of antennae and sat-dishes concealed among the rusty metalwork, painted with fake mutie-gull guano to blend in. They had a word for what was done on Nu Sealand: Sig-Int.

Signals Intelligence, that was the term. In the core, a weaselly gaggle of techs studied and evaluated millions of pieces of radio traffic from all across the hemisphere, sifting and collating it for analysis by a different gaggle of techs at some other secret base. To Ivar, the idea of reading Souther emails every day was the most boring thing he could imagine, so he was thankful that he had been given the job of standing guard while someone else ploughed through the endless pile of communications. Out here, far from the dirt, mud and blood of the real fighting, Ivar's only mission was to walk a route that never changed, circling the western face of the vast rig, watching for contrails or the signs of ships on the horizon.

Like all the polluted waters of Nu Earth, the foetid stench of the Orange Sea's marine microclimate was enough to keep the virulent chem-clouds at bay; so while the air around Nu Sealand was breathable, it was a cocktail of the most repellent scents imaginable. Ivar's commander had once described it as being similar to "a boiling pot of excrement, vomit and caustic soda". Still, you got used to it after a while, and it meant that the Norts on the platform could go about barefaced, at least when there weren't any acid storms in the vicinity.

Ivar took a long drag on the kaff-stick. He couldn't stand the idea of being sealed into a chem-suit, maybe for days on end, incapable of having even the briefest of smokes. Sure, this place

smelled like puke and if he fell over the side, the toxins in the water would turn him into meaty slurry in a matter of minutes, but at least he could light up.

He cast a lazy eye over the poisoned ocean, but Ivar didn't expect to see anything of interest. Since the Norts had taken Dix-I, the only thing coming over the horizon were broadcasts from the Nordland forces simulant sweetheart DeeTrick, her synth singing bawdy tunes about her exploits in Nu Atlanta. Ivar sighed. He hoped that the fall of Dix-I wouldn't mean the end of Nu Sealand's usefulness to High Command, because that would mean reassignment, and maybe some actual exposure to warfare.

Little of the kaff-stick remained and Ivar began the return leg of his patrol to the post where Lindquist would be waiting; newly promoted to sergeant and one pay grade above Korporal Ivar, Lindquist would probably be polishing his rank pins again. Ivar rounded a stanchion and saw the sergeant leaning over the guardrail, staring down at the russet froth around the stilt legs. It wasn't until he got closer that Ivar started to become concerned. It seemed like Lindquist wasn't breathing.

"Hoi!" he said around the cigarette, reaching for the other man's shoulder, "Are you—"

Ivar took a handful of Lindquist's jacket and pulled him up from his crooked stance. He almost swallowed the kaff-stick in surprise. "Stak!" Protruding from the sergeant's pale neck were three small knives made from a dull, matte plastic. The blades of the little weapons had swelled up after they penetrated his skin, thickening enough to choke the soldier to death. Every detail of the silent murder imprinted itself on the Nort's eyes.

Korporal Ivar felt the onset of loosening bowels as he imagined where the knives might have come from - had they been thrown? Not from the sea, no, too far. Not from above... That meant the killer was on the same deck! Ivar went cold as he realised that he'd walked right past a pool of shadows cast by the stanchion, large enough to conceal a man. He clutched his rifle, brought it up and fumbled at the safety catch.

The length of chain was connected at one end to a pulley mechanism that had served some forgotten purpose during the rig's construction; the other end was wrapped around a balled fist belonging to a figure that stood, not in the shadows, but directly behind Korporal Ivar. With brutal economy of movement, the grimy line of metal links looped over Ivar's head and coiled around his neck. The chain bit into his throat and

tightened inexorably. Ivar had the brief impression that the figure behind him was bare-chested, but the lack of air in his lungs seemed to be playing tricks on his eyesight, warping his sense of colour. The Nort soldier let the gun drop and clawed at his neck, tearing his skin as he tried to lever the makeshift garrotte from its deadly embrace. However, his trachea collapsed under the pressure and the lifeless body slumped to the ground.

As he exhaled a final puff of air, the smouldering kaff-stick dropped from Ivar's mouth and was sent tumbling over the rail. His assassin, with the speed and deadly grace of a coiled cobra, snapped at the falling cigarette and caught it before it could fall down below; the chance was slight, but a burning cigarette butt could ignite a pool of flammable tox-sludge. The killer ground the butt into the palm of his hand, ignoring the faint sizzle as it snuffed out - the hot tip left no marks on the vat-grown plastiform flesh. He threw the dead korporal a blank look. "These things will kill you." The voice was low but intense.

Satisfied, Ivar's murderer moved silently to Lindquist's corpse and recovered the three D-Daggers in his neck, collapsing them back to their original throwing mode. He made sure that there were no other observers in sight and then pitched the two men into the sea. If anything remained of them once the chem-sludge had done its work, there might be a few meaty morsels for the slug-sharks.

Powerful fingers dug into lips of rusted metal, revealing where epoxy seals had been placed to hold a wide ventilator grid closed. Silently, the killer marshalled the musculature of his arms and chest, and with a sharp squeak, the grid came away. He slipped into the vent shaft and pulled the grille back with him. Inside the conduit, the air was hot and thin streams of burning steam coiled upward; the heat would have blinded a normal man, but he would be unaffected for quite a while. The biological machine of his body was far more efficient than the crude design made by human evolution - he was a finely tooled organic instrument that had never been subject to the random whims of nature.

Gently, the killer made his way downward, searching for the branch shafts that led to his target.

Data fell through the computers like sand through a sieve; trillions of bits of information, terabytes of code, voices, images, all of it ceaseless and unstoppable. The work of making

sense of the “catch”, as the technicians liked to call it, belonged to Nu Sealand’s most important team member. Vok-IV was one of hundreds of similar units scattered in bases across Nu Earth, a dedicated artificial intelligence that could trace its lineage back to the primitive smart machines of the twentieth century, devices with names like “Echelon” and “Zagadka”.

Vok-IV’s sole purpose was to listen and parse communications traffic into discreet packets of intel for Nort High Command’s cryptography and logistics battalions. Every three hours, it would squirt a compressed stream of lexicode to a secure transmitter and pass along another million lines of battle plans from the Southern lines. Both sides rotated their code keys on a daily basis – some of the more sensitive units did it on a hourly basis – so a lot of what Vok-IV handled was unreadable, given classification through point of origin or destination rather than content. However, there were some Souther ciphers that the Nort had torn wide open and their text streamed across the screens of the monitor techs, giving them something to do in between the checking of the AI’s coolant systems.

Tek-Specialist Erno was on desk duty shift, and he cocked his head to watch the clear data stream race past him. The other technicians passed the time by placing bets on the content of certain messages or reading the enemy soldiers’ letters home; such activity would have been grounds for serious charges if the unit’s political officer knew of it, of course. Erno stifled a yawn. A solboat convoy in the Western Sea was calling for rescue from a wolf pack of Nort Mantas; Private First Class Taylor of the 151st Rangers was getting a “Dear Joan” letter from her lover; a neutron missile had hit a railhead in Nu Dakota; an outbreak of black rictus was being reported in Toxville. Another uneventful afternoon in this small corner of the galaxy’s longest running war.

Of course, Vok-IV didn’t just listen to the enemy. The wide-band scanners tuned in to frequencies used by the scattered independents and Freeport zones across the planet, looking out for information from battlefield looters and profiteers. And unbeknownst to all but a select group of staff (of which Erno was one), Nu Sealand also eavesdropped on its own side. A special section of Vok-IV’s operational memory was devoted exclusively to checking the parity and content of Nort communications, looking for any signs of duplicity, treachery or malfeasance. After all, there were traitors and opportunists on both sides of the Nu Earth war.



Erno frowned at this thought, remembering the lengthy series of loyalty tests and biometric checks he'd had to undergo before being stationed here. High Command ensured that everyone with direct access to Vok-IV was a staunch Nordland party member; anyone who came up short by their stringent standards swiftly found themselves posted to front-line operations like Nu Paree's endless street fights or the lethal Morrok Combat Zone.

Such a "reassignment" had happened quite recently - one of the scanalysts from F-Sector had made a few impertinent comments about Grand Marshal Von Gort, only to be escorted on to the next jumpshuttle out, bound for what the base commander called "a more challenging appointment". The errant technician's shuttle had never made it to whatever meat grinder it was destined for, though. A day later Erno had noticed comm traffic from a search and rescue unit as it passed through the datastream, reporting that the transport ship had been shot down by a Souther orbital lancer. If Erno ever entertained the idea of even thinking something disloyal, he would remind himself of the stills of that crashed flyer, reduced to a ball of indistinct wreckage somewhere on the Dix-I plains.

He glanced around the room. Erno was alone. He could see the shape of a guard through the frosted glass of the core chamber's hatch, but he was behind five centimetres of plastisteel; Erno could shout obscenities at the trooper and never be heard. Erno gave his chair an experimental spin. As he turned in place, his eyes ranged over the banks of consoles, the ducting from the power core and then the central frame of the Vok unit itself. Big, like the magazine from some giant's pistol, Vok-IV was a block of machined aluminium riddled with tubes carrying pinkish coolants. At this angle, Erno could see the heart of the machine, the oval module of the datacore. He watched a blinking green light turn red on its surface; the unit had just fired off another databurst. In three hours time, the greedy little code-monkeys at crypto would be ready for another helping. The core was such a small thing really, no bigger than a handball, and yet it was the very reason for Nu Sealand's continued existence; had the listening post not been here, the Norts would have reduced the rusting rig to slag years ago. Erno's commander was fond of telling his men that the Vok-IV was much more important than any of them. In the balance of things, the officer often said, the lives of all the technicians combined were worth less than the least expensive component inside the datacore. How this knowledge was supposed to motivate them, Erno wasn't sure.

They were glorified watchmen, really, observers looking over the machine's shoulder on the million-to-one chance that the unit might suffer a breakdown. It was dull work, but at least it was safe.

Erno spun on his chair again, quicker this time. He saw monitors, ducts, Vok-IV, more monitors, the wall. Another spin. Monitors, ducts, a blue man, Vok-IV, more monitors.

The Nort fell off the chair in surprise when his brain caught up with the images from his eyes. "Buh," he managed, attempting to force himself back up from the floor. The intruder crossed the room in quick, lightning-fast steps, snatching at Erno's tunic. The technician drew in a breath to scream - not that it would have mattered - but then found it impossible as the swift figure pressed a serrated combat knife to his lips.

"Quiet," he was told.

Erno looked into inhuman eyes, greenish-yellow without a trace of pupil, eyes that regarded him with clinical, detached precision. The face they were set in was a strong, sculpted mask, hard and much abused like that of a prize-fighter, but also curiously smooth. The technician suddenly thought of the classical sculptures looted from old Earth in the museums on Nort Sekunda.

Erno had spent his entire tour on this planet reading Souther comm signals, so he knew exactly who and what had walked into the computer chamber. There was a legend in the room with him, a blue-skinned ghost conjured up by the worst of battlefield science. A freak. A monster.

A Rogue.

"Key," it said.

Erno blinked. He had never really believed the stories that the Genetic Infantrymen actually existed, instead considering them to be some weird piece of Souther misinformation and propaganda set out to encourage tall tales among the war zones. And for long moments he found it hard to connect the creature holding him by his throat to that abstract idea.

"Your key," repeated the GI.

Dutifully, Erno produced the beam-key from its loop on his belt and handed it over, thumb and forefinger extending. It wasn't like the enemy soldier would be able to use it, anyhow. Erno had to be in direct physical contact for it to work, so the bio-lock could read his DNA pattern.

The Rogue Trooper gave Tek-Soldat Erno the smallest of smiles. "Thanks," he added, and then with a single stroke of his knife, he cut the technician's thumb and forefinger clean off.

As pain and shock shot throughout his body, Erno fell back into his chair, screaming. Rogue crossed to the Vok-IV and squeezed the severed digits and the key into the right slots on the module, absently wiping blood off his broad chest. The computer core flowered open and offered him the datacore like a gift. Rogue reached into the rain of vaporous sub-zero liquids that kept the AI just above freezing and tore the unit out, ignoring the rime of frost that snapped and crackled over his fingers.

Erno skittered backwards on his chair's castors, kicking and flailing, and a trail of blood marking a dot-dash path after him. He could now see where the vent shaft had been opened from the inside, the marks in the metal where bare hands hard as iron had pulled and tore it. With the most total physical exertion of his life, Erno forced away the blazing pain from his injury and used his off-hand to slam a circular button on the desk. Instantly, a siren began to wail.

The GI ignored him, unhurried in his task, and placed the datacore in one of two blocky pannier packs strapped to the thighs of his fatigue trousers. Erno's vision began to tunnel from shock and the sound in the chamber was becoming woolly and indistinct. He saw the hatch slide open and a guard barrel in, a heavy flechette pistol in his grip; standard firearms were not permitted inside the computer chamber, for fear that an accidental discharge could strike a vital component. The frangible micro-arrows the guard's weapon fired could make a red ruin of flesh but would bounce harmlessly off any solid surface.

The pistol made a coughing sound and suddenly there were dozens of plastic darts embedded in the GI's chest. The trooper, who appeared annoyed with this untimely intrusion, bushed them away with one hand, tossing his bloodstained knife with the other. The blade buried itself in the guard's forehead and he fell away, out of Erno's line of sight. The technician blinked slowly. Peculiar that the Souther soldier had no weapon of his own. Where was his rifle, his headgear or his backpack? The question followed Erno into unconsciousness and faded with him.

Rogue recovered his combat blade from the guard's corpse with a sucking noise and took up the handgun as an

afterthought, then he sprinted away toward the main elevator. The dense Nort datacore thumped against his leg as he ran.