

## Playing by the Rules

by Mark Tuttle

It had been a quiet evening in the Rats' Nest. Two stabbings, a host of illicit transactions involving a fat Shi merchant, a short volley of gunfire and a man being decapitated by a woman who didn't appreciate a comparison to the man's sister. All in all, not a bad day for business, mused Dooley, the bar owner.

Nevertheless, as it often happened at Ceres' favorite hot spot, the entertainment arrived, albeit late. The smoked front window exploded inward as a large, fleshy body was heaved through it. The body bounced off one table that tipped over under the impact which helped propel the body another couple of feet into the lap of the Shi merchant. Dooley noticed the Shi pat the man's pockets as he pretended to scurry out of the way. The body hit the floor amid the sound of breaking glass coming to rest and patrons scrambling away.

Everyone in the bar looked up from the crumpled man on the floor to a large brown boot that stepped over the bottom window frame and into the bar. A long leg was connected to the boot, and the leg was connected to a rather remarkable man. His thin but muscular frame stood nearly seven feet tall. He was shirtless but it was really a moot point as both arms, hands, and a great deal of his torso was made of various fittings of titanium biotech. In his right hand was a long, slender bolt-action plasma cartridge rifle. Another was strapped to his back and various pistols, knives, batons, and other weapons jutted out of numerous pockets and compartments in his garb.

Jack Wilgress studied the reaction in the bar briefly before swinging his other foot in and stretching up to his full frame.

"Who is he?" Wilgress bellowed.

At first, no one moved or spoke. Wilgress took a deep breath.

"WHO IS HE?" he yelled, this time punctuating his sentence by a quick, one-armed cocking of his rifle.

Several patrons dropped to the floor and scurried under tables. A few others scrambled towards the exits, tossing handfuls of credits at Dooley as they settled their tabs on the way out. No one answered the question.

A squat, older man in a short green coat waddled over to the body and prodded it with his toe. He looked out of place in the Rats' Nest but seemed quite confident in approaching Wilgress. He also stood out in that he showed almost no enhancements, with the exception being the nanotech hair implants the Maverick scientists still haven't gotten to work right. Wiry tufts of auburn wire pig-tailed out of his many bald spots. He looked up at Jack with a scowl.

"You might have asked his name before you killed him, Jack," Pheelas Renaud said.

Jack shrugged as his disposition became less threatening. Stepping down into the bar he nodded toward the body on the floor. He nosed his rifle behind his head and into an empty holster sling strapped to his back.

"He's not dead," he said matter-of-factly. "He'll probably wish it tomorrow, but he'll wake up."

“What happened?” Pheelas asked. The two walked toward the back of the bar as many of the patrons returned to their business.

“I got word he’s been asking around about me. I hate that. I came back from some target practice earlier and I caught him trying to wire a tracker into my ship.”

Jack pulled a small device from a pocket and handed it to Pheelas. “Hmm,” he said, studying various wires dangling from the unit. “Not terribly sophisticated, but it doesn’t appear dangerous.”

“He was touching my stuff. You know I hate that too,” Jack snorted. Jack stuck a thumb back toward the front of the bar. “Ask around and see if you can get a name. And give Dooley some creds for the window.”

“That makes five you’ve bought this year, Jack,” Pheelas sighed. “There is a door here, you know.”

“I’m tall. The window is easier. I don’t have to duck.”

Pheelas shook his head as he walked back to the bar to converse with Dooley. Jack sat down and picked up a half full glass from the table. He sniffed it curiously, his bushy mustache twitching. He took a drink and spit out the thick green liquid.

“What the hell?” Jack sputtered, wiping his mouth with his hand.

“They call it Kerallh,” said a voice from the table behind Jack, a little farther back in the bar. “With more and more Shi coming in here, Dooley worked out a deal to get in some of their own spirits. The sweet aroma deceptively hides the acidic taste and somewhat unpleasant taste.”

Jack looked back around at the stranger in the corner but didn’t reply. Another glass on the table contained what looked like beer. He scooped it up and drank it down.

“Dooley!” Jack shouted. “Give me a real beer.” Jack paused for a moment and continued. “And I’ll give you a thousand creds to flush all of this green Shi crap down the toilet!”

The Shi merchant near the door heard this, as Jack intended, and spun around to look at him. Jack responded with the classic two-fingered “pretend gun” motion. The Shi got the message and quickly floated to another corner of the bar. Jack chuckled as a server bot placed a beer on his table.

“I can tell you his name,” the stranger behind him said.

Jack didn’t react visibly. He took a long drink and licked his mustache as he set the glass down. He swished the beer around in the glass while watching the foam. He wasn’t going to be the next one to speak.

Nope. The guy sitting in the dark obviously wanted to make conversation, so Jack would let him talk. People wanted to know things about him that day, so let him ask.

The next person that speaks, loses. Jack knew that lesson.

Jack took another swig of beer and let out a big “Aaaahhhh.” The half of the bar that wasn’t already watching him nervously turned his direction.

Any second now, this guy was going to get to speak up.

Soon.

Damn!

"Alright, who is he?" Jack shouted, visibly perturbed as he swung around in his chair. "And why is he so interested in me?"

It was dark enough to hide most of the man's features but Jack could tell he smiled. The man took a long drink himself of a dark liquid. Setting the glass down on the table, he continued.

"His name is Kanid," the man said. "He's working for Hance Tech over on South Celestial Ceres. Does that sound familiar?"

Jack frowned, turning back to his beer. "Yeah, it does. But that's my business."

"Oh, I know a great deal about your business, Mr. Wilgress. An expert sniper and weapons master, you stood to have an excellent career in the Earther forces. But you gave it all up due to your problems with authority. You brought your skills to the Outer Rim and picked up odd jobs as a debt collector, bounty hunter, even a marshal for a time."

Jack didn't respond. He looked back at the man, knowing he hadn't yet gotten to his point. A server bot brought another round of beer as they're programmed to do, forty-seven seconds after you finish your last one. This was Dooley's way of making sure everyone kept buying drinks.

"And then one day," the man continued, "you wake up in bio-tech recovery at Hance Tech here on Ceres. Your arms are gone and enhancements in their place. A few other pieces were replaced as well. No idea how you got there or who footed the bill. How are the arms treating you these days, Mr. Wilgress?"

"Couldn't be better," Jack said, downing another half of a beer to fill time. "Ask that guy over there."

"Yes, Mr. Kanid. He was just doing his job, you know."

"And what was that? Spying on me?"

"Yes, mostly. He's like you, a bill collector. He was there to collect your debt, Mr. Wilgress."

Jack held that thought for a moment. "And what debt is that?"

"After waking up at Hance Tech, you just walked out. When the initial shock wore off, you began to accept your enhancements, and you went back to work. But you were different, weren't you?" the man said, excitement rising in his voice.

"You've become amazing, Mr. Wilgress. And dangerous. And now, Hance Tech is ready for you to serve them for your debt."

Jack pondered about this for a while. He had held a rifle for as long as he could remember. Growing up on Earth in Arizona, shooting had always been a part of his life. His aim, although always good, was now perfect. He rarely missed a shot. His eyesight improved. At times, he would swear he could see a target when there was no way possible. It was as if he could visualize it and the bullet would just "find it." He shook it off as dumb luck. No one could be as good as he had become. But, and he would never tell anyone this, not even Pheelas, this happened before he woke up in Hance Tech with two new arms. In fact, it started around the time that damn hole in space opened up.

"Who are you? You obviously work for Hance Tech, right?" Jack asked, much less confidently than he'd asked a similar question upon entering the Rats' Nest.

"My name is not important, but I don't work for them. However," he reached into his coat pocket, causing Jack to lean forward so his rifles wouldn't get caught between his back and the chair, "I would be happy to trade some information with you... based on the outcome of a game?"

He held a deck of cards in his hand. An old and tattered deck of Earthier playing cards. It looked original based on the long-obsolete and non-holographic look to it. He thumbed the cards and flipped them loudly, a few at a time.

"You do play, don't you?"

"Not poker," Jack replied. "Too pedestrian. Blackjack is my game, for obvious reasons. You either have the hand, or you don't."

"Then I propose a game. The rules are simple. When you win a hand, you may ask me a question that I must answer honestly. When I win a hand, you must answer mine," he declared as he began shuffling the cards. "Honestly."

Jack felt an odd tingle at the base of his skull but it passed quickly. "So this game is about information? No creds, eh?" Jack looked over at Pheelas who was talking to other bar patrons and pointing at the still unconscious body on the floor. "Ok, sure. I hope you're in the mood to talk," Jack smiled.

Jack pulled his chair around so he was at the table and facing the mystery man. Now that he was closer, he got a better look at his opponent. He was in his late forties, physically fit, and wearing a tight, slightly shimmering business suit with a grey jacket open down the front. His upturned collar had two small pinholes anyone with normal eyesight would never have seen. Jack's eyes were far from normal though.

"So what rank were you?" Jack inquired as he moved some glasses away to clear table space.

The man stopped shuffling for a moment and blinked at Jack. Then he smiled broadly. "I do so look forward to our game, don't you?"

The first four cards were dealt, one down for each player, one face up for each. The goal is to reach twenty-one without going over. Whoever gets closest without going over wins. Jack showed a seven of hearts to the dealer's nine of clubs. Bending up the corner of his face down card, Jack saw a seven of clubs. His opponent looked at his face down card and calmly announced, "Stay."

"Hit me," Jack resigned.

The dealer flipped a queen of clubs onto the table. Jack scooped the cards up and tossed them aside. "Damn."

"Well, I have won. So I get to ask you a question, Mr. Wilgress." The man leaned in close to Jack. "How do you feel?"

"What?" Jack replied a bit stunned.

"How do you feel since the Rift opened and our friends from the 'other side' came through? Do you feel different?"

Jack was taken aback by this question. He felt different but he sure as hell wasn't going to tell him that. "Yeah, I've felt strange. It's like feeling a low current running through me all of the time. It seems to get stronger as I get nearer that sector of space. I'm getting used to it though."

Jack started visibly. Why did he say that? It was the truth, yes, but he blurted out before realizing it. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes hard. The man across the table just smiled. "Let's deal another."

This time, Jack got a nine of spades up to the dealer's four of spades. Peeling up the face down card, Jack saw a ten of hearts. Keeping his game face, Jack paused a beat before he decided to say 'stand.'

"Hit," he announced confidently.

What? He choked as a seven of spades dropped in front of him. He hadn't just said that. He hadn't. But he did. Something was wrong here. "What... what just happened?" Jack sputtered.

"Well, I win another," the man beamed, turning over a three of diamonds. He leaned in close to the table so he looked up into Jack's eyes. "So now I would like to know what types of abilities you've shown since the Rift opened. Have you been able to do anything you couldn't do before?"

Jack began to feel sweat running down his sideburns. He struggled not to speak. The tingling in his head reappeared and he found himself speaking again.

"My eyesight is better than ever and my aim is perfect. I rarely miss. Sometimes, I feel in my head like I can see my target as if he's right in front of me even though he's a couple hundred yards away. It's like I'm forming a mental image of the target and choosing where the shot will go."

Jack bit down on his lip so hard it bled. He began to growl in frustration. He struggled to stand up from his chair but couldn't seem to get his body to do what his brain commanded.

"Now, now, Mr. Wilgress. You agreed to play and we're going to finish our game," the man reminded, shuffling the remaining cards. "You agreed to play the game so you have no choice but to finish now. Oh, let's add a few more rules. You will not draw your rifle, or any of your other weapons, on me. You cannot lay a metallic finger on me either. These are part of the rules now. Since you agreed before, surely you can see the need for these small additions, right?"

The tingling in Jack's brain returned. "Yes, that's acceptable. Wait. What... are you doing?" Jack asked, his anger rising.

"You are not the only one to experience changes," the man whispered looking toward the rest of the bar. "We call people like you... and me... kizen."

Jack let up on his lip and looked curiously at the man. "Never heard of them and I'm certainly not a... kizen... or whatever you said."

"Ah, but you are Mr. Wilgress. You see, something happened when the Rift opened. We're not sure exactly what, but many of us began experiencing changes. Wonderful new abilities began replacing deficiencies. Weak men have become strong. Timid men became bold. Exceptional men became... legendary," he explained, bowing his head briefly toward Jack.

Jack considered for a moment and realized he had felt different since the Rift. He had always chalked it up to a heightened state of anxiety about the new dynamics in the already tense struggle with Earth and Gongen.

"And you're one too. Were you the weak or the timid?" Jack spat.

The man smiled again. "I gained a unique ability. I am only now beginning to perfect it. I can suggest, mentally, that someone do things a certain way. Much like your atrocious card playing. But first, I need to gain the subject's approval to use it. Consider the old wives' tale that hypnosis cannot make you do something you wouldn't normally do. I got you to agree to play the rules of my game and now I'm in your head. I cannot read your thoughts, but I can easily make you tell me what I wish to know."

"I am going to kill you," Jack told him. "Right now."

"Go ahead. Shoot me or strangle me," the man smirked. "While you're doing that, I'm going to deal the next hand."

Jack sat still as a stone. He had every intention of pulling his rifle and blowing the stranger's head off. His body ignored the command. Four more cards were dealt out. Jack showed a seven of diamonds, the dealer an ace of clubs.

"Crap," Jack complained. "I get the impression I'm going to hit, right?"

The man turned over his face down card to reveal a King of hearts. "I win again," he smirked, leaning in again while scooping up the cards. "Who knows or suspects you have become something greater than you were? Who else do you know has exhibited extraordinary abilities?"

Jack looked over at the bar. Pheelas had settled into a conversation with a blue-haired woman. "Pheelas suspects something. He's my weapons master so he has noticed that I am exceeding my equipment's capabilities." Jack shut his eyes in frustration, knowing he'd just put about his only friend in grave danger.

"Then perhaps we'll deal with him once I'm done with you. And look, we have but one hand to go. The bet for this one is simple. If I lose, you may kill me."

Jack looked surprised and suspicious all at once. "And if I lose?"

"You will graciously give me a sample of your brain tissue. It is an important piece of the puzzle that is Jack Wilgress. Our research requires it, unfortunately. This will, of course, require me to remove your brain. I'm afraid it's a terminal procedure. You understand this of course. It's not like I will volunteer to give them a piece of mine."

"Then play me a fair hand!" Jack shouted. The bar patrons turned away except for Pheelas who looked up. But he knew better than to interfere with Jack during a card game.

The man smiled again. "We've been playing fair all along. You have just been making bad choices."

The man dealt the cards out. One face down to Jack, one face down to himself. Jack was dealt the ace of spades. The man dealt himself a two of hearts. As if out of curiosity, the man glanced at his face down card. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. I think the dealer might have this hand."

Jack bit his lip again, not wanting to speak. If he said 'hit,' he was dead. Hell, he was dead no matter what he said. He had been trying to bring himself to shoot the man or jump the table and hit him for the last several minutes to no avail. He knew if he turned over that card, he'd see a ten or a suit. Not enough suits had shown yet so he was in good shape. He had to win this hand. He looked down at the table and noticed the half glass of beer sitting in front of him.

He grabbed the beer and drank it slowly, down to the bottom.

"That won't help you," the man condescended. "Drunk or sober you will do what I wish. Look at your card."

Jack set the glass down on the table with a thud, shut his eyes, and put his head almost down to the table. He began muttering under his breath.

"What are you doing? Look... up... at... me," the man commanded. Jack looked up, still muttering slowly and methodically.

"What are you saying? You cannot distract yourself. Finish the game!" he shouted. Jack continued to mutter. "Tell me what you are saying! Speak up!"

Jack opened his eyes and stared right into the man's face. "Forty-three... forty-four... forty-five... forty-six..."

"What?" the man yelled as something entered his vision to his left.

"Forty-seven!" Jack yelled. He swung his right hand out and caught the neck of the server bot, which held a tray full of beer glasses. In one motion, Jack threw the bot over the table, smashing it into the face of the man across from him. Several bones in the man's face cracked as his nose exploded in a shower of blood. As the bot screamed for security, both it and the man slumped down in the booth while Jack pushed himself backward out of his chair and onto the floor. Seeing the commotion, Pheelas came running over.

"What's going on?" he yelled to Jack.

"Pheelas, hit me in the head with a glass as hard as you can," Jack ordered, trying to shake the tingling sensation from his skull. He heard the man groan and begin pushing the flailing server bot off of him. "Do it! Hit me!"

"Ooh, I get it. Bad draw and you need an out," Pheelas whispered. "Ok, I'm on it!"

Pheelas stood straight up and shouted more in the direction of the bar than Jack. "Curse you, Jack Wilgress! You slept with my wife!" Pheelas looked toward the bar and spotted the woman he'd just been speaking with. "Uh, I mean, you slept with my sister!"

"What?" Jack replied, struggling to get away from the table.

"Take this!"

Pheelas swung a bar glass in a wide arc, missing Jack by several inches and spinning himself halfway around. The momentum took Pheelas off his feet and dropped him in the chair Jack had been sitting in. Pheelas' head hit the table hard and knocked him out cold.

"Damn it, Pheelas! You swing like a girl!" Jack hissed.

Jack was about to push away when the tingling in his brain ignited like a fire.

"Mr. Wilgress. Jack," the man calmly spoke, his voice affected by a broken nose among other injuries. "We got off to a bad start. Let us finish our friendly game. I believe it's your turn to hit or stand."

Jack felt the pull at his skull, like a worm tugging its way through the dirt. He had to play this hand. He only had an ace of spades. The face down was probably a two or three. He might as well take a hit. He had to win this hand. The next card would surely get him to 21.

He stood up and stepped back to the table. Despite the commotion, the ace was still face up and a card laid face down below it. He reached for the card.

"Hit or stand, Jack," the man asked slowly, sniffing through the blood.

Jack almost had the face down card in his fingers when a blast of color and images hit his brain. His eyes opened wide and he staggered momentarily; overwhelmed by a sudden sense of vertigo. His mind filled with images of fire and dust, blackness surrounded by water, ripping, healing, swirling colors. He closed his eyes and stepped back rubbing them with his metallic fingers.

The images roared by faster and faster. Flashes of unrecognizable faces and locations assaulted him on an ethereal level. He felt as if he was falling but didn't know in which direction. His knees were about to buckle when he heard a voice. A clear and cold voice that came from everywhere at once. It only spoke one word but it thundered inside his head, threatening to drown out the rushing of . . .

And it was gone. Jack's vision cleared as he glanced around. Pheelas sprawled half in, half out of the chair he fell into. The server bot has scrambled away and the man stood across from him behind the table, his forearm to his face trying to stem the flow of blood from his nose.

"I'm growing impatient with you, Wilgress. You know the game. You know your options. Finish your hand," he ordered. No more smile, no more smugness.

Jack looked at the table. "Ace up. Probably a two or three down. Doesn't look good." Jack picked up the face down card and shook his head. He looked up at the man who had moved his hand inside the breast of his coat.

"Hit or stand, Wilgress. Make it easy for me. Your cooperation will ensure the other kizen we locate will be put to good use," the man said, showing his impatience.

Jack held the card he picked up in his hand close to his chin. "Well, when you put it that way." Jack tossed the card on the table face up. The jack of spades landed on top of his face up ace. "Stand."

The man's eyes widened in surprise as he pulled his hand from his coat, drawing a thick-barreled gun. Jack responded so quickly even the security cameras had a hard time catching it. Jack pulled both rifles over his head in a cross-armed pattern. Sparks flew as the rifle stocks scraped as he uncrossed his hands. Both rifles fired in such perfect synchronicity that the impact from two point-blank rifle hits blew the man straight backwards and into the wall. Without turning his head, Jack's right-hand rifle swung in arc toward the bar's front door. Two more shots rang out at a large man who had jumped toward the table when the man drew his gun. No one moves toward a gunfight so his intentions weren't good. He was more than likely the man's backup in case things went bad. Jack only turned his head to check the shot after the bruiser hit the floor, his torso ripped open.



Jack then threw himself onto the table behind him. He continued rolling backward while bringing his other rifle to bear on a third man who actually got off a shot. The blast smashed into the wall on Jack's left as the other rifle came to life bringing the third man down. Finishing his roll, Jack landed on his feet and scanned the bar his rifles sweeping back and forth. No one dared make a move. Few bar patrons would meet his gaze except for Dooley, busy scrawling on a touchpad, and counting the broken chairs and glasses. A server bot cowered in a corner behind the bar.

Content for the moment the threat had been eliminated, Jack looked down at Pheelas, and shook his head. "I have to teach you to hit, my friend." Jack righted his friend in the chair and looked over to the man he'd been playing the deadly game with. He searched through his pockets but found nothing to indicate who he was or what rock he'd crawled out from under. Jack looked at the other two dead men, figuring they were just as anonymous.

Jack stood up and holstered both rifles. He scratched his chin trying to figure out what had happened. Two people today knew about him or wanted to know more. This man called him a 'kizen', insinuating he had some sort of power. Obviously, this man had powers of his own. He had played Jack like a puppet. In the end, Jack figured he would have been carving out his own brain while this guy watched. But what were those images? And who did he hear say, "stand"? Jack was sure that had saved his life. He looked up again through the bar, and his eyes landed on the Shi who he had noticed before. The Shi stared at him momentarily and then made a three-fingered attempt to return Jack's "finger gun" movement. Suddenly the light went on in Jack's head. Jack wasn't sure a Shi could smile, but he'd swear this one did, as he floated out of the bar, giving Jack a sideways glance.

"Ooooooh," Pheelas groaned from behind Jack. "What happened?"

Jack reached down and slapped Pheelas hard on the shoulder. "You were incredible! You saved my life!" Jack mocked.

"I... I did? Really?"

"Absolutely! In fact, blue over there was so impressed, she told me she wants you to buy her a drink!" Jack beamed, pulling Pheelas up from the chair and pointing him in the direction of the blue-haired woman who had gone back about her business.

"Umm... really? Well, okay. Sure!" Pheelas mumbled, rubbing the bump on his head. "But wait, Jack. What if she has a boyfriend or something?"

"Oh, them. Yeah, don't worry about that. I shot both of them for you," Jack whispered, pointing to the bodies on the floor. Noticing them for the first time, Pheelas jumped. "You can return the favor by paying Dooley for the damages."

Jack slapped Pheelas on the back again. "See ya later, buddy. I gotta visit some people at Hance Tech." Jack strode out of the Rats' Nest, chuckling. Pheelas stared after him, looking at the bodies on the floor, the body in the booth, the woman with blue hair and Dooley standing behind the bar tapping two fingers on his datapad.

Pheelas had absolutely no idea what to do next.