

Scarface's Burden

By
Joseph Devon

(The following story is based on the song "Skullcrusher Mountain" by Jonathan Coulton.)

Scarface stood at the end of the pier and stared out at the golden submarine. He sometimes felt claustrophobic when he wandered too deep into the tunnel network, but standing at the edge of the subterranean lake always sent him in the opposite direction, the vast emptiness stretching out into the darkness never failed to unsettle him if he stood there too long. Even the darkness itself seemed to consist of a penetrating presence that was intent on creeping up the pier and across the dock and back into the hallways to swallow them all.

Fending off the dark were a number of light stands arrayed on the pier, their harsh halogen beams cast the submarine into contrasting lines of shadow and light. It sat large and restless, moored by two dockside cranes which held it half out of the water. Its riveted golden hull was mottled and green from months of neglect and exposure to the elements. It was a sleek machine when properly maintained, but it currently hung at the end of the dock a lifeless mass. Even the playful oversized calligraphy of its name, "Death From Below" etched across the stern seemed out of place.

Scarface set down his briefcase and stared. His face was a study in angles, tight lips, sharp nose, acute eyes, all of which were offset by his namesake, a deep brown scar that carved a neat line about half an inch in width from his jaw to the top of his ear.

He could hear the soft drip of water from some leaking pipe or broken seal under the submarine. A whiff of air, stale from the surroundings, puffed across the lake, and with a barely audible sigh he turned and walked back across the empty pier, across the dock, and into one of the tunnels.

The tunnel was warm and well lit and he soon left the looming darkness of the lake behind causing his walk to loosen. His high buttoned collar and crisply starched pants made it impossible for him to assume anything more relaxed than a determined stroll, but the tight lipped rigidity of the pier was gone.

He made a few turns, navigating the maze of tunnels with ease, pausing to greet the occasional jumpsuit wearing worker changing a light bulb or fiddling with one of the wall mounted heaters. Then he stopped in front of an ornate wooden door. With the air of someone who is trying to keep a hold of themselves, he stood himself up straighter, checked the top button of his shirt, then lifted the bronze door knocker and gave a few loud raps.

He waited, leaning forward, briefcase in his hand, his shoulders arched as if he expected the door to open at any second. Instead an inaudible murmur sounded from within. Scarface paused, his hand wavered between the knocker and the door knob. Finally he decided on the latter and with a loud click and a creak he opened the door.

The room inside was a disturbing mix of cave and comfort. There was a tattered, thickly woven rug arranged across the stone floor, its tassels dusty with age. The walls were sparsely adorned with drawings and sketches leaving the natural jagged rock exposed throughout most of the room, yet sitting in the middle of all of this was a large leather La-Z-Boy. The chair was facing a set of homemade, waist high bookshelves overflowing with books and a couple of other objects hidden under dustcovers. All of this was in one corner creating a den-like space offset from the rest of the room. Behind this were a scrubby kitchen and

several large drafting tables piled high with paper. Scarface walked along, looking at the various pots of old Chef Boyardee that were still sitting, cold and half-eaten, in parts of the room. He glanced down at one of the drafting tables as he passed, his eyes scanning over the writing.

“Particle Beam Weapon power supply,” one page read, “power supply possibly created by ?turbine? powered generators?” Underneath were several half finished schematics and a few building plans. The sheet was covered with several coffee stains indicating that it was older than some of the others. The newer ones were written in a shakier hand and contained only the errant wandering of pen over page, never obtaining anything more lucid than a rare half-fleshed out doodle.

There was a soft squeak from the lazy boy and Scarface turned to see that The Master was now turned towards him. His eyes were staring intently at Scarface and Scarface felt a shock of adrenaline. The feeling that by looking over The Master’s notes he had been prying into The Master’s private thoughts was difficult to shake off.

“Hello, sir,” Scarface said, trying to sound calm.

The Master leaned his head in slightly, as if hard of hearing, and then he reached up a hand and yanked at a wire dangling across his chest. Two earphones popped out of his ears.

His face had the hints of a handsome interior, but the growth of stubble and his bloodshot eyes kept that interior well hidden beneath a crust of neglect. He smoothed a palm over his straw-brown hair and it slicked back in neat rows as if it were either heavily gelled or hadn’t been washed in awhile. He was wearing a gray sweatshirt that was a size too large on him. His blue jeans had a smear of spaghetti sauce down one leg.

He held up one of his earphones by its cord and stared at it. “You can’t hear the music in these things,” he said with disgust. And in one fluid motion he rose out of his seat, tossed the earphones along with his MP3 player off into a corner where they rattled and bounced against the wall and began striding towards one of the dustcovers next to the bookshelves.

“Sound is a product of motion and air,” he said, removing one of the dustcovers and gathering it into a ball as he walked along. “You need distance for sound to achieve meaning.” He finished removing the dustcover to reveal a stereo system from the early eighties encased in a dresser that seemed built to accommodate it. “I mean. It’s not like you’d go to the symphony and ask that one of the cellos be stuck in your ear.” He knelt down and opened one of the cupboards of the dresser and began flipping through record albums. His words and actions were energetic and purposeful. He turned a few switches on, then stood and placed the record on the turntable before fitting the needle into the groove.

After some hissing and popping an old Motown tune came on and the singer’s soulful voice began trying to sing away heartache. The Master walked back over to his seat, the leather creaking and squeaking as he settled back into it, and as the sound of the record passed over him he seemed to deflate. It was as if his chest and face had lost their support and the energy that just seconds ago had been so accessible to him was now no longer available. There was only his body, limp and lifeless, staring blankly at the speakers resting on the dresser shelf.

Scarface had watched all this with scrutiny, the excitement, the activity in the body, then the collapse, and he seemed to be registering little details and making mental notes of what he was seeing. A few seconds after The Master had sat down he continued to stare at the back of the La-Z-Boy. Then, with a determined breath, he picked up his brief case and came around to the front of the chair. He drew up a footrest and sat down facing The Master, cleaning an area off of an end table next to the chair.

The Master's head rolled around and he looked at Scarface with no recognition on his face. He only stared out of watery bloodshot eyes as if watching something taking place on a television screen in front of him, then turned and went back to staring at the speakers.

"Master?" Scarface said, once he had settled himself in and opened his briefcase up on the end table. There was no response.

"Mr. Skullcrusher, sir?" he tried again. No response.

"Bob?" Scarface said, and the word held warmth in it, it was spoken in the voice of one friend reaching out to help another. The Master stirred, his head lolling on its neck to once again turn and look at Scarface. "There are a number of things we need to talk about," Scarface said.

"Not now," The Master said.

Scarface cleared his throat, uncomfortable pushing further, "It has to be now, sir. Winter is almost half over and we need to start thinking about which projects we're going to focus on for the Spring. There are power stations to be brought online and the men need to know which machinery needs to be retooled and prepared for re-"

"None of it."

Scarface barely paused, the negative response only registering slightly on his face. "And there are finances to be rerouted and distributed. We're rather heavy into real estate at the moment and not at all liquid."

The Master was looking at him harder now. "I said none of it will move forward."

Scarface avoided his gaze and turned to the briefcase. "And I've scouted any number of women from the local towns." He pulled a few manila folders out of the case. "We have a professor of physics over at the state college," he flipped to another folder, "and this one I thought was very nice." He took a photo out of the folder and held it up for The Master to see, although Scarface's eyes remained locked on the folder itself to avoid having to meet his gaze again. "Her name is Helen Weinstart. She aced her boards and declined an offer from MJR Enterprises for the position of head engineer in order to pursue a-"

The Master's hand reached out and plucked the photo from Scarface's hand. With a quick turn of his wrist The Master tossed the photo across the room. "I don't want," he said in cold deliberate words, "another woman."

"Yes, sir," Scarface said, still not looking up, fidgeting with the briefcase. "But I thought that maybe," he went on, unable or unwilling to stop himself, "this one, for instance," and he took up another photo, "she's very bright and could make a very good match for you this-"

The Master roared and the end table was flipped over, the briefcase flying across the room to crash against the wall. "You are *not* listening. There will be no other women. There will *never* be another woman. There is Mary. There will only be Mary."

The papers that were floating and wheeling through the air slowly settled to the floor as The Master said nothing else and Scarface only sat and stared into the distance trying not to be noticed. "Now have you done *anything* that I have asked you to?" The Master asked, his voice commanding attention, compelling response. "Have you taken care of Ponkey?"

"No, sir."

"It has been weeks since I told you do to that."

"I was just on my way to do that, sir."

"Good," The Master said. "See that you get that taken care of." He stood up and walked over to the record player. He reset the needle at the start of the album and walked back towards the chair, already the energy and animation that had taken over him was fading and apathy was returning to his face and body. He sank back into the leather, swiveled around to

face the speakers, leaned the chair back into a reclining position, and forgot entirely about Scarface.

The rustle of papers mixed with the Motown lament coming from the speakers as Scarface started picking things up. As quietly as possible he pulled the contents of his briefcase together and righted the endtable. He placed all the folders but one back inside and clicked it shut. The folder he had left out was that of Helen Weinstart. He took her photo out and placed it on top of the folder, then placed the whole packet silently down on the end table at The Master's elbow.

He was almost at the door when The Master spoke up, his voice drifting over from the chair with some hint of the previous flashes of emotion. "And it's Sunday, Scarface. Make sure the Doomsday Squad gets a special treat for dinner."

Scarface's hand was on the doorknob leading out and his whole body seemed to tighten, the angles of his face and body drawing up into near physical pain as the words reached him. His voice was miserable as he answered, "Yes, sir," before opening the door and walking out.

The room was paneled in white particle board, unpainted, the nails holding it in place were still visible, a cheap fiberglass drop ceiling loomed over everything interspersed by buzzing neon lights.

For the moment the sounds of the pinball machine were the loudest things in the room. Bells and clackers and the cold metal ball rolling over a surface of lights and buttons. There were three men standing over the machine, one playing, furiously working the flippers while the other two watched, equally involved. They all had shoulder length hair that looked like it had been cut at home and thick black rimmed glasses. Their age could have been anywhere between sixteen and thirty.

Five other guys were gathered around a television that looked like it had been manufactured barely a year or two after color screens became a standard feature. All five looked like distant cousins of the three playing pinball, their faces all had the same basic look, although none of those at the television set were wearing glasses. All five of them erupted into a loud cheer as a hockey player on the television checked another player into the boards. The commotion caused one of them to bump into a tin foil sculpture that was fragilely balanced atop the screen, which in turn caused the picture to become fuzzy, which caused a fresh outburst of anger and shouting.

At the center of the room were a couple of second hand couches arranged in no particular pattern. There were a number of other guys sitting around these tinkering with all manner of backpacks and helmets and the occasional weapon. Again, the faces of those on the couches looked eerily similar to the other faces in the room, as if they were not too separate branches of the same family tree. It was one of these men who noticed Scarface enter through a door at the front of the room.

"Hey!" the man yelled in the type of voice that clearly needs no real reason to start yelling. A six pack of beers was picked up off the couch, one was removed, and the can was thrown Scarface's way. "Scarface is here!"

With a deft hand Scarface caught the beer and placed it on the ground at his feet, not taking another step into the room. "The boss wants you to have a good dinner tonight as it's Sunday."

The guy playing pinball slammed a hip into the machine and the top rocked against the wall, battering against a well worn spot, as his ball began to roll out of his control. The machine lit up with a “Tilt” and the man playing threw his hip harder into the machine, cursing at it, which incited all three to begin pounding on the machine, the glass rattling, the top banging into wall again and again before someone shouted at them from the other end of the room.

“Hey, shut up over there!” one of the guys trying to watch TV shouted before turning towards the door. “Scarface, why can’t we get a decent TV in here, eh?”

The group watching TV all began to chime in, the talking becoming yelling as they all tried to be heard, then the ones at the pinball machine began banging on it again until the guy who had first seen Scarface come in began bellowing louder than any of them to get quiet. Finally, for no discernable reason, things settled down.

“You can’t have a new TV till you show me you can take care of an old TV,” Scarface said, glancing over in the corner where the hulks of three other broken televisions sat on the beer stained carpet.

“Hey, is the boss feeling better yet?” the one playing pinball said, shouting over his shoulder as he kept his ball in play.

“That’s no concern of yours,” Scarface said, and his hand unconsciously brushed some lint off of his sleeve. The motion was tiny, restrained, as if by keeping clean and never actually interacting with anything in the room he might also keep everything that was going on in the room from affecting him.

“Sure it is,” the pinball player said, not noticing Scarface’s tone. “When he gets all pissy like this we get locked in here. No chance to get out and play.”

“Yeah,” one of the ones watching TV shouted. “That’s right, eh? You should bring Mary back. The boss was happy with Mary.”

“Yeah,” one of the ones on the couch asked, “whatever happened to Mary?”

This was too much for Scarface and his protective inactivity cracked, his face took on emotion, disgust and disbelief. “She’s...she’s *dead*,” he gasped. “She tried to make a break for it out of the west bunker a few weeks ago. And you *know* that.” He stared at the one on the couch. “You were the one who helped me remove her body from the barbed wire.”

The one on the couch didn’t react, only continued to smile the same way, stare the same way, politely comprehending nothing through a strong beer buzz. “I did?” His t-shirt was far too tight and, as he turned to one of the other ones on the couch, the phrase “You can take the troll out of The Barrens...” was distended across his chest.

“How bout that, eh?” he asked, throwing a powerful punch at the other one’s bicep. When one punch didn’t get a reaction another one was thrown, then another, then there was a screaming cheer from over by the TV as one of them got the tin foil structure into the exact right position and the picture became clear again as a shouting match broke out on the couch.

Scarface was clearly irked by the time things became quiet again. “Pizza,” he said. “You get to order pizza tonight. Pick your toppings.”

“Unlimited?”

“You get three.”

“What?!”

“Oh that’s just bullshit, eh?”

“Yeah is that what the boss said, because-”

Scarface took one step back and threw open the door. It opened out with a bang and the dark chill of the stone hallway began to seep into the room. “Maybe you’d like to ask the

boss yourself?” Scarface asked. Everything silenced instantly. Only the last pings of a pinball falling to rest on the table filled the room. Then that, too, fell quiet.

No one responded.

“Three toppings,” Scarface went on. “And make it quick. I still have to tend to Ponkey.”

“Pineapple!” One of them shouted.

“No, we should get bacon, eh?”

“Bacon!?” A third shouted back.

Scarface glanced down at his watch. His foot began tapping on the carpet.

Scarface walked along another underground path, this one with an uphill rise. His walk was agitated and as he walked underneath a light installed in the stone ceiling he looked at his watch again. “Forty minutes for them to settle on extra cheese,” he said, and the speed of his walk picked up imperceptibly.

He rounded a turn and walked up four steps carved into the stone. At the top was a door. He paused in front of it and reached for a set of jackets hung on hooks next to the doorway. Once he was safely ensconced in a thick thermal coat he pushed open the door and stepped outside.

He walked along a mountain path. Above him, lead gray clouds hung low in the sky and he could feel the coming snow pressing down on him. He made his way along the gravel covered path towards a long low building that comprised the compound’s stables which sat at the far end of the plateau. Behind the building the orange light of sunset scraped and clawed streaks through the cloud cover. He still carried his briefcase and he had forgotten to grab a pair of gloves. The wind chilled his knuckles and he hurried across the rest of the path, quickly opening the nearest door.

He passed a few workers in blue jumpsuits mucking out a stall.

“Gwen?” he asked. They pointed him down the hall and he continued walking. As he walked further through the stalls the rank smell of animal began to permeate the air, feeling like it was going to cling to his clothes and skin.

“No,” he heard Gwen’s regal voice say. “Stalls three and four need new straw and I want Izzy moved into number eight, not nine. Is that clear?” he rounded the corner and saw a short, chestnut haired woman, barely out of her twenties, in full riding gear instructing three more jumpsuited workers. They drank in her words like hungry lapdogs, waiting until she had not only finished speaking but also given a clear sign of dismissal before they turned to carry out her orders. As she watched them go she caught sight of Scarface and her face recomposed itself into a defensive scowl of tight little lines.

“That’s not an attractive look for you,” Scarface said. Gwen didn’t respond, only began walking back along the stalls as Scarface fell into step with her. “I guess we’re not going to bother with small talk,” Scarface said.

“You disgust me,” Gwen spat towards him as they walked along.

“It’s not my choice.”

“You never liked her,” Gwen said, stopping at a stall. She gripped the handle and rolled back the wooden slotted door. The smell of horse filled the air, along with a rawer smell, more dirty and pungent.

“She is certainly not my cup of tea,” Scarface agreed, looking into the stall. There was a soft snort of a horse followed by some gentle grunting. “Far too much monkey.”

Gwen stepped in and stroked the animal's pony nose, its prehensile tale twitching with happiness. She sniffed and Scarface was uncomfortably shocked to see that she was on the verge of tears.

"You know it's not my choice," he said. "I don't like Ponkey a whole lot but it's not like I want to see her dead. It's Master's wish. No remnants of Mary."

"And that's it. We just do whatever *he* says?"

"That is traditionally how this runs its course, yes."

"I raised Ponkey," Gwen said, her voice wavering, "I cared for her, trained her, groomed her, and figured out her diet. He only saw her *once* after she was created, when he brought that woman to see her. And then all he did was walk away all embarrassed when she started screaming."

"Yes," Scarface said, "I was there."

"Ponkey is *mine*," Gwen said, tears running down her face, "After the care I gave to this animal I'm owed the right to decide what happens to her. He owes me that."

Her face was stunning in grief, girlish charm awash in mature tears.

"Perhaps you'd care to take it up with him," Scarface said, unmoved.

Gwen didn't respond, she only stopped crying.

"That's what I thought," Scarface looked over the animal again. "He owes *you*," he said disdainfully. "And you owe *him* nothing? You pledged *him* nothing? Winter rolls around and everyone likes to forget everything he has done for us. Everything he has promised to do for us." There was venom in his voice as a small bitter taste of the toil of the last weeks and months crept into Scarface's words.

Gwen wiped some tears off her cheek with the back of her hand. She turned towards Ponkey, slowly stroking her nose. "And how is he?" she asked, Scarface's rebuke having had an effect on her, but pride not allowing her to admit anything more than composure.

"Worse than I've ever seen him," Scarface answered, equally civil, a truce of sorts having been silently agreed upon between them. "Usually there have been signs of life by this point, but I haven't even seen the first smile."

Gwen stroked Ponkey's nose one last time, then took her by the bridle and began to lead her out of the stall. "Do you think he'll get over her?"

Scarface started walking alongside as Ponkey's hooves rustled over straw. "Spring will come," Scarface said.

They entered the main hall of the stable and began walking towards the rear door. "I'm assuming we can't drug her?" Scarface asked, looking at Ponkey.

"I wouldn't even know where to begin in working out the dosage," Gwen answered. "I wouldn't want to hurt her. There's really only one quick and painless option."

"You know you can trust to me for that."

"I'll do it, thanks."

"That works as well."

"We might as well do it out by the grave," Gwen said.

"I had thought the same thing."

"Otherwise we have to move her out there after...after."

"My thinking exactly."

They made their way back outside and onto the plateau, each wearing a padded winter coat. The two walked in silence, Gwen leading Ponkey along as they rounded the mountain and arrived at a patch of well tended lawn, clearly manufactured but well tended nonetheless, in a nook that was safely out of the way of most weather.

“He really thinks it matters where Ponkey lays to rest? He’s just going to let the wolves get after her, anyway. Same as all his other gifts.”

“It is how he mourns. I try not to pry. But it is how he got over the first one. So it is how he likes to get over all of them.”

“You really think this helps?” Gwen asked, searching for some way to rationalize what she had to do.

“I do,” Scarface answered, telling the truth. They stopped in front of a row of gravestones.

They were standing near the oldest gravestone. “Cynthia Skullcrusher,” the carved granite letters read, “1987.” Walking along the long row Scarface looked at the next stone. “Alexis Skullcrusher - 1988.” Then came, “Georgia Skullcrusher - 1989.”

His eyes roamed over stone after stone, each one lined up in a nice row, each one a new name, each one marked by a new year. They walked through the decades until they arrived at the end of the row. The grave was relatively fresh, it was still dirt, sod hadn’t been placed down yet and the headstone was polished and new. “Mary Skullcrusher - 2007.”

“This is barbaric,” Gwen said. “This work is nothing but barbaric.”

“Yes,” Scarface said, his voice betraying nothing, “but the health plan can’t be beat.” Scarface set his briefcase down and knelt, thumbing the clasps and opening it. Held against the lid with two straps was a pistol which he retrieved. With quick hands he checked the round in the chamber and the safety before handing it, butt first, over to Gwen. “You still sure you want to do this? I’m more than-”

Gwen took the pistol and with shocking abruptness cocked it, took aim at a specific spot on Ponkey’s skull and pulled the trigger. The sharp report echoed against the rock wall, doubling its sound, and Scarface felt himself jump as Ponkey’s body collapsed in front of Mary’s grave.

“That it?” she asked, handing the pistol back to Scarface.

Scarface blinked a few times, then reached out and took the pistol. “That should do it, yes,” he said.

“Okay. I’ve got work to do,” Gwen said, and she walked back towards the stables.

Scarface stared after her.

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In the depths of Skullcrusher Mountain, in a room filled with drafting tables and old pots of Chef Boyardee, The Master’s form lay sleeping in his La-Z-Boy. The record playing on the hi-fi across the room had reached an end and the needle was constantly bouncing against the label as the vinyl made revolution after revolution.

Stirred by something internal The Master woke up, rubbed his jaw sleepily and looked around the room. He glanced at the end table next to him and saw the face of Helen Weinstart staring up at him from her photo on top of the manila folder that Scarface had left behind. It was the first time he had actually looked at the photograph and he noticed that her eyes seemed friendly.

He turned away as he assembled his sleep addled brain and stood up, pushing his hands into the small of his back and stretching. He walked across the room towards the refrigerator, thinking about digging something up to eat, and passed by one of his drafting tables. His eyes ran across one of the sheets scattered on top of it and he froze in mid-step while he read over the equations sketched in his rushed hand. There was an equation solving for the area under a curve where he had misplaced a square root sign. He stopped, amazed

that he hadn't noticed that before. Patting and reshuffling papers around he managed to find a pencil and fix the mistake, in doing so he realized that the equation was now more suited to solving another problem he had been working on...if he could only find it. More paper shuffling, a move to a different table, and he found the worksheet he was looking for. Scribbling notes in the margin he began moving from one table to the next, looking over the equation, then the problem, then back and forth again. New sheets were added, his pencil painting genius across them as he began to work in earnest.

A quick break twenty minutes later to find a new pencil caused him to walk past the end table again. Helen Weinstart. She really did have a nice smile.

He picked up her photo and brought it, along with a fresh supply of pencils, back over to the drafting table. He propped her picture up against the wall so she was facing him and he turned back to his work. The pencil moving faster and faster, now pouring a rough but detailed schematic out onto the paper, occasionally his eyes glancing up at Helen's picture. Her eyes were bright, a clear sign of intelligence, he thought. Surely *she* would understand. And as his eyes returned to his work a peaceful smile spread like sunrise over his face, his pencil madly racing across the page the only sound to compete with the scratch of the needle as the record across the room spun around and around and around.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.

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