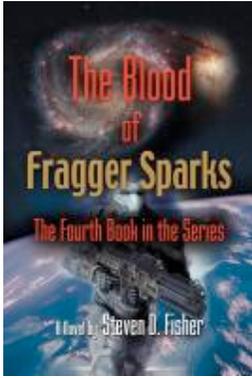


The Blood
of
Fragger Sparks

The Fourth Book in the Series

A Novel by Steven D. Fisher



Patrick Sparks has surpassed his father's ability to travel the multiverse, and the lords of Aifor are not happy about it. If they can't get the secret out of him, then they want Patrick dead. He's caught in a toxic stew of repeated assassination attempts by his enemies and betrayal from within. Join Patrick as he leads the way into worlds his Ranger father - or his enemies - never dreamed of!

The Blood of Fragger Sparks

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By

Steven D. Fisher

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ISBN 978-1-62141-879-5

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2012

First Edition

Chapter 1

Patrick Sparks bent all six feet of his 13- year old body into a crouch and leaped over the edge of the 200-meter cliff, his curly black hair flying upward.

As he twisted in the air, he smiled back at the three observers, drew his blade from its sheath on the belt and stabbed it at them. He wore a white t-shirt and dirty jeans with dusty leather boots. All the clothes had been recreated from the era in which his father lived, and he was quite proud of that fact.

The knife was his father's as well, and it was a Fairbairn-Sykes dagger, an ancient Terran weapon with a razor-sharp edge. The fighting pose was all modern, though. Patrick had learned it by watching the Jivaron Rangers train.

It was the fifth time he'd done the pose that morning.

As usual, he disappeared, not below the rim but from the air itself. Unlike usual, he didn't reappear next to observers.

Amalia wrapped her arms tightly around her daughter, Melida, to keep her from squirming off her lap and attempting to copy Patrick's impossible actions.

"The boy is driving me crazy!" she said to the man sitting next to her. "Who knows where he is now?"

Iso Watanabe smiled. His eyes were closed and his head was tilted back to enjoy the heat of a spring sun that had finally risen above the peaks of the Kajolen Range and dissipated the fog. His upturned jaw looked like one of the mountains, simultaneously chiseled and worn. And, as with the peaks, there was white on the upper slopes of his head.

"He's Fragger Sparks' son, Amalia. And it's his birthday. We told him he could do what he wanted. Did you expect anything less? And, remember, I've had him practicing for years at the

chalet. He knows every inch of our ground from the barn to this cliff and beyond.”

As always, his voice sounded to the Shuar woman as if someone were pulling a file across his vocal cords. Its harsh sound cut through the quiet buzzing of bees visiting the sweet-smelling Aiforian primroses.

“No normal child jumps off a cliff...repeatedly!” she insisted.

Iso smiled again. “‘Normal’ was never a word applied to Fragger, so there’s no reason to attach it to his offspring, is there? I think he’d be quite proud of Patrick’s fearlessness. And a bit jealous of his MASER ability to travel the multiverse at will, I suspect.”

Amalia frowned. “Fragger explained that old Terran term to me once – “Mentally Adapted Soldier, Experimental” – and I’ve always hated it. So cold and unfeeling. Anyway, if he were still alive, he’d be as nervous as I am. After all, it’s his child. Any parent would feel that way!”

Iso turned his head toward her and opened his eyes. Their brownness was full of tolerant amusement. “You’re not worried about Patrick. You know he’s okay. You’re just worried about Melida.”

Irritated by his condescension, Amalia said, “Damned right, I am! She’s only eight years old and wants to do everything her half-brother does. It makes me sick with worry that she’ll jump off that cliff.”

“You know what that means, don’t you?” Iso said.

“What?”

“It means you’re a good mother.”

“Don’t try to change the subject with flattery!”

Iso sighed and straightened in the camp chair. “I came up here for some peace and quiet before the party begins. Obviously, that hope was fruitless.”

“You’re still trying to change the subject, you old fart of a Ranger warrior!”

Her aggravated tone made him rise from the chair and face her. “You still miss Fragger.”

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“Of course, I miss him! What kind of stupid statement is that?”

“There’s no replacement for your husband, is there?”

“No, there’s not.”

“Then, Amalia, why do you insist on treating me as if I were Fragger?”

“I don’t!”

“You’ve been nagging at me this morning as if I were! I understand all your concerns about Patrick and his actions, but I have little authority over him. I’m not his father!”

Amalia glared at him. “You’re as close as it gets. He considers you his uncle. Every boy needs a father figure, a role model.”

“I don’t disagree with you in that regard.”

“Then, what are we arguing about? What’s your point?”

“My point is, I can’t live up to Fragger’s legend. No man could.”

Amalia frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Iso pointed a finger toward the spot where the boy had last stood. “Haven’t you wondered why Patrick insists on jumping off that cliff over and over again?”

“He’s a teenaged boy as of today. He enjoys worrying me to death.”

“That’s only part of it, Amalia.”

“What’s the other part then?”

“With every jump, with every stab of his knife, Patrick is trying to live up to his father’s image.”

“I want him to be proud of Fragger,” Amalia said.

“Understandable, but I don’t think you realize you’ve created a burden for the boy, and you’re still creating one.”

“What do you mean?” Her tone was sharp.

“You talk about Fragger every day. Incessantly, in fact.”

“I’m just trying to keep his memory alive, Iso!”

“I know, but do you realize that you never praise Patrick directly when he accomplishes something?”

“Of course, I praise him. I praise him all the time!”

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Iso shook his head. “No, you don’t. You say, ‘Patrick, Fragger would be so proud of you.’ Or, ‘Your father would love what you’re doing.’ Or – “

“What’s wrong with those words?” Amalia interrupted. “You’re not making any sense.”

“I’m making perfect sense.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“You never tell him directly how *you* feel,” Iso said. “It’s always how his father would feel. In a very subtle way, you’re letting him know that he’s not your son.”

“He’s not,” Amalia said, “but I care for him as if he were mine.”

Iso was blunt. “No, you don’t. You know he’s the child of Andriana Lesto and Fragger, and you resent that fact. Even though she was a soul-sucking aristocratic bitch, she has some part of Fragger you’ll never have. They’re both dead, but you haven’t buried them. You don’t mean to, but you keep taking dirt out of their graves and throwing it on Patrick.”

Anger surged through Amalia. “That’s not true, and you know it! And, anyway, what would an old insensitive military lifer like yourself know about mothers and children in the first place? Until Franzie came along, you never had a real relationship in your entire life.”

“That may be true,” he said, “but it doesn’t mean I’m blind. Every word I say is true, and the proof lies in the fact that you’re so incensed about it.”

“Well, what do you expect? You insult me and –“

Iso raised a hand, battered and thick from years of combat. “Let’s just stop it for now, shall we? We’ll need to finish this conversation, but it’s Patrick’s birthday, and we shouldn’t spoil it for him.”

Amalia rose and put Melida down, wrapping her arms around her at the same time to comfort the girl who was upset because of the tone of their voices. “You’re damned right this isn’t finished, but where the devil is the boy? We can’t have the party without him.”

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“Who knows?” the warrior said.

“He could be in trouble, Iso!”

“Amalia, if someone is trying to hurt Patrick, pity them. They’re the ones in trouble.”

Chapter 2

Jin Griggan, the assassin, was doing his job the old fashioned way.

No chameleon technology.

No PPC rifle or any weapon that might give off an energy signature.

He'd gone with a rifle he'd never employed before, an ancient weapon he bet hadn't been used in action in over six centuries.

Griggan stroked the metal of the modified M2 50-caliber Browning machine gun. Legend had it that the weapon had been used by the mythical Marine sniper, Carlos Hathcock, in one of Terra's proxy wars.

He hadn't believed the gun seller about its provenance when he bought the rifle on the weapons planet, Glathrod, but didn't care. What sentimentality he had was focused on weapons and the history of snipers. He wanted to use it because of the many accomplishments of Hathcock and because there was a certain, satisfying symmetry to what he was about to do.

The story was that, among his many exploits, Gunnery Sergeant Hathcock had spared a 12-year-old Vietnamese boy delivering supplies on a bicycle by shooting out a tire. But, the boy had come up firing, and the sergeant had been forced to kill him.

The mission was the same today. Kill a young boy.

But Gunny Hathcock didn't have to deal with the son of Colonel Fragger Sparks, Jin reminded himself as, below, the boy hurled himself off a 200-meter cliff for the fifth time that morning, and then, inexplicably, disappeared into thin air.

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Until he'd arrived, camouflaged by a Gilly suit and the earlier fog, at the spot 2,000 meters above the cliff, Smith hadn't really put much stock in the stories about Patrick Sparks.

He was a believer now.

The damned kid can go into hyperspace on a personal level...or jump through multiverses...or whatever the hell his ability is. Nobody really knows, but it's damned impressive!

He'd already had numerous chances to shoot the boy, but had been fascinated by the leaps off the cliff and by the fact that the man, woman, and girl accompanying Sparks had seemed to display no qualms about letting the kid leap into the void.

Jin shook off the reverie, cussing himself out for lack of concentration, and adjusted the telescopic sight he'd put on a mounting bracket designed by himself, just as Hathcock had done.

With the 50-caliber round, a shot beyond 2,000 meters was no problem at all for an experienced sniper.

And I am experienced, Griggan thought, allowing himself a moment of pride. *Over 100 kills, the best by far in the Griggan family, and I put in hours and hours of practice with this M2. My father will be proud of his favorite son when I bring Patrick Sparks' head back in the stasis bag. His death is a dead certainty.*

Jin smiled at the pun as he patted the camouflaged bag sitting atop his small backpack and the accompanying katana that would slice the boy's head from his body as easily as a knife passing through butter.

In my line of work, it's always good to have a sense of humor...now, kid, it's time for you to show up.

He settled into a position as comfortable as the terrain would allow and trained his scope on the site below him once again. The woman stood suddenly and faced the man, angry with him while holding the girl close to her side. Both seemed to search about them, seeking to take their irritation out on Patrick Sparks.

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Jin was amused again. *I'm annoyed by the boy too – he reminds me of my idiot younger brother, Knut - but I can take care of his behavior in a more permanent fashion.*

The assassin nearly jumped out of his skin when a voice near to him said, "You might want to leave now. You shouldn't be here."

Jin dropped the rifle. In one motion, he drew his prized antique M1911 .45 pistol from its holster and rolled over and up with the weapon trained on the boy.

Patrick Sparks smiled. "It won't do you any good...whatever your name is."

The black-haired teenager sat in a lotus position, looking for all the world like he was in a serene state of meditation rather than facing a trained killer. The only clue that gave lie to this belief was an ancient dagger held in the boy's left hand.

Jin found himself even more annoyed than before. Irrationally, he took comfort in the fact that a large pimple was on the boy's solid chin. It seemed like a necessary flaw in the young man's physique. He was skinny but wiry with wide shoulders. Gold-brown eyes regarded the assassin with a preternatural calm.

Too bad the boy won't live, Jin thought. Those eyes would trap many a young girl in their gaze. Damned women always like a man who's just short of pretty.

"My name is Jin, Jin Griggan," he said, "and I apologize for having to kill you."

"It's my birthday. I'm 13 years old today."

"It's my job, Patrick."

The teenager sighed. "You're the sixth, you know."

"Sixth what?"

"Don't play dumb with me. Sixth assassin. Not one of them has succeeded."

"And why is that?"

The boy smiled again. This time it somehow slid into a teenaged smirk that got Jin's blood pressure near the boiling point.

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Now I'll be glad to kill this young prick!

"Well, stupidity seems to play a great role in it," Patrick answered. "Otherwise, they wouldn't keep sending people like you after me."

Jin nodded down at his weapon. "You seem to forget that I have a pistol, and its projectile is faster than any knife."

The teenager followed his glance. "A slug-thrower, isn't it? And that rifle is one too. Both very old, just like my knife. Clever. There's no energy signature to detect."

"Speaking of detection," the assassin asked, "how the devil did you find me?"

Patrick shrugged. "I've been roaming these hills since I was a kid. I know every square centimeter of this ground. Even with that natural camouflage, you stuck out like a sore thumb."

The casual dismissal of all his efforts in putting together the Gilly suit infuriated Jin even further.

"You're a smug little bastard, aren't you? Well, sorry to put an end to your arrogance."

He reached down and pulled an item free of his backpack.

"You know what this is, boy?"

"What?"

"It's a stasis bag. It keeps anything in it in a fresh condition. Like your head because that's where it's going to go so I can take it back to my father."

The crack of the .45 split the quiet mountain air and sent Kajolen mountain bluebirds panicking into the sky.

Jin rapidly squeezed off two more rounds to make sure he'd killed the boy, then squinted in dismay through the smoke.

All he'd killed was grass and dirt.

The boy was gone.

Then he wasn't.

From behind him, Jin heard a voice.

"I told you it wouldn't do any good. You wanted my head. Now, I'll have yours."

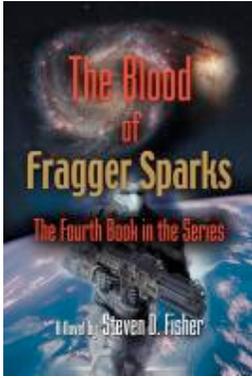
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Before he could move, Jin the Assassin felt the sharp edge of the blade slice into and across his throat and became acutely embarrassed before consciousness began to slip away.

Bested by a pimply teenager.

But a sense that everything would come out right after his death remained to the last and bloody breath.

The boy beat me, but he hasn't faced my father yet. My only regret is that I won't be alive to see that.



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